



1.

J the E.



isorder

isconnection



He awoke to the faint sound of grating bone.

In the dead of the night, when he opened his eyes, he lost his sense of feeling in his arms and legs.

He was mimicking a transparent chrysalis. He became a dwarf, no bigger than the palm of a hand, locked inside the brain. However much he moved his limbs, his sleeping corpse would not budge.

Only his left arm was connected to his trapped mind. The blood beating in those veins was transformed into information. He felt the illusion of a mere part replacing his whole. Being only able to move his left arm meant that the existence of ^{Ishizue Arika} 石杖 所在 was concentrated in his left arm.

"—ah"

His body, is in pain.

He hears the sound of grinding.

He feels the chill of his body being scraped away,

The pleasure of his entirety being chewed.

The realization that he was being eaten.

^{The arm} He ^{his freedom} faded away and he finally regained himself. In the darkness, he heard slurping. He removed the blanket.

On top of the bed was the sight of complete red. The girl, stained in pure red from the nose down, smiled at him with her shattered jaw.

"Onii-chan, it hurts doesn't it?"

The girl was taken a hold of by something *wrong*.

On his left arm which had been gobbled up quickly, there was no pain, there were no bite marks. The girl licked the severed surface with her shattered jaw. As if to fill in the large hole of one who has lost someone.

It was a silent night of grating bone.

The sound of budding, beautiful life.

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Now I remember. It had been the end of summer, back when I finally was released out of that prison they call a hospital and when I had been seriously thinking about whether I should go back to college.

I'd been making my way into the home of a neighbor, someone I've seen around the block a few times, a ^{Kizaki}木崎-san. At seven o'clock, when the sun had set, without pushing the door bell or saying anything, I snuck in through the front door.

Nah, I was going to smash a window to get in, but luckily it wasn't locked. Careless schmuck. Now, see that? That makes me look like some punk thief. Problem was, I couldn't say it was off the mark at all.

Just one month ago, on the night of September 12. I had illegally entered the residence like a burglar because I wanted money.

Apparently, there had been a family suicide at Shikurazaka. The guy who was informed about it had been an officer at a nearby police box. There'd been a phone call from the head of the Kizaki household, the first thing in the morning, or so they say.

"Last night, the three of us, me, my wife, and my daughter, committed suicide by wringing our necks rather pleasantly. It would very much be appreciated by me if you take care of the mess as soon as possible. I certainly don't want to inconvenience the neighbors."

Bad joke. But unfortunately for the officer receiving the call, he didn't have the sense to figure out what part of that he was supposed to laugh at and headed

straight to the Kizaki residence, then *blam*. Never heard from again.

Ditto for the other officer that came by looking for his partner when he didn't come back past noon. The police box at block 2 of Shikurazaka became an empty husk for half the day and news of this strange incident spread before the police department even got word of it. 'Course, it's not the kind of stuff that would make its way on the air waves since it is just local, but really it's just gossip among people living around the area. *Oh dear heavens, that officer hasn't come out from the Kizaki's house yet, oh ho ho ho. Oh, that reminds me, I wonder why the window shutters have been closed since yesterday, oh ho ho ho.* I don't know if these housewives are alert or just have nothing better to do.

Gossip like that crept gradually throughout town, eventually reaching the sharp ears of the lovers of the curious, sometime after 2 pm. Apparently they shared the news with me, and there had been phone calls in the afternoon. Don't remember the stupid details of the conversation, but the time is definitely there on the call history.

As of 6:40 pm, there had been 2 calls before the sun had set from a TSURANUI and KARYOU KAIE. Don't care about the *Tsuranui* one but the *Kaie* call? That's a problem. There's something ominous just by getting a phone call from an oddball that loves cell phones but hates making phone calls.

And so, it's a little before 7:00 pm. After the sun had set, there had been a third phone call. The number of the caller didn't show up on the display. I waited a little before I answered the phone. What was to be said couldn't be any simpler. The man told me his name was Kizaki, gave me his address, and said,

"I'm very sorry. I'm tired so I want you to exorcise me."

Then he hung up after giving me that very sorry-sounding line. What I really wanted to do was forget about it and go back to sleep, but there were three reasons why I couldn't ignore him.

Number 1. The massive amount of memos on my desk. Probably advice from *Kaie*, detailing the events today of the Kizaki family suicide. Number 2. The address of Kizaki-san's that I just heard. Shikurazaka, block 2, 4-7, that's only three houses away from me. Shit. And number 3. I happened to have the luck to still have *Kaie's* arm today. Yep, the stage is prepped. If I pull it off, maybe I'll get reward money from *Mato*-san.

Okay, so I've never heard anything about civilians getting money transferred into their accounts for cooperation in arrests, but maybe she'll be a little nicer to me in the future. All right, I'm going. From a rough calculation, I determine that expectation value exceeded trouble value. Before leaving, I briefly check through the memos, finding an extremely important "*Look him in the eyes and you will die*" notice written with a red pen.

"*Look him in the eyes and you will die.*" Wow. What is this, a ghost story? Trouble value is exceeding expectation value a wee bit. But, having already gotten pumped up into doing the deed, it felt like a hassle to just go back to my room.

And that brings me to the Kizaki residence. The entrance I snuck through had a nice feel to it. A persimmon or apple-like hard but flexible, juicy meat kind of feel.

I move in with my shoes still on. Wooden walls, stained with the stench of everyday living. A narrow, fragile hallway where the floor looked like it would break before you hear it creak. Light flickering on and off without rest. Despite

that, it's as dark as a monochrome image. This was a house covered in black film.

In the living room, the TV's been left on, with the usual Sunday night anime running. Oh, you know, that never-ending story, the one that revolves around the daily life of a certain middle class family. So anyhow, right in front of those guys who sustained their household for decades without changes, were the corpses of those people who couldn't keep theirs up.

A mother and daughter probably. The mother's slumped on the table, the daughter's lying on the floor. Even though both of them were lying stomach flat down, they were clearly staring at the ceiling. They had very sad expressions. Their tearful faces looked like they exhausted a lifetime's worth of emotional reactions. This week's episode in the life of ^{I s o n o}磯野 xxx-san¹ must have been a real tearjerker, eh. Okay, okay, people will make these kinds of faces when confronted with incomprehensible violence.

But still, just what are you supposed to do to turn out corpses like these? Suicide by hanging is well known, but actually rotating the head itself to break the neck? That takes a bit of power. Only thing I can think of is that huge vices were locked on their heads and then twisted. Not that it matters. This isn't the time to be deducting this and that about something unimaginable. It's none of a burglar's business if a locked room murder happened in the place he's burglarizing.

Before long, this week's quality family time ended. Putting behind the trailing closing credits, I bring myself to the stairs. The film covering the house was becoming increasingly filthier, and the instant I reached the 2nd floor, the color changed so much I couldn't believe my eyes.

¹ Sazae-san.

The wooden hallway completely switched to concrete. From black to white. The faintly dirty hallway gave me the impression of a grave religious painting.

"Crap. I'm not sleeping am I?"

Oh, lovely. Dreams and reality just had to get spliced in together. I don't know where the swap was, but at the corner at the end of hallway, there was, some kind of, almost dried-out-tree-like human figure.

"Excuse me, are you a priest?"

The dead tree had a good, penetrating voice. Bastard. Great, just great, I am seeing a dream that has no connection to the Kizaki House.

"Sorry pal, I'm not a priest. Priests don't bring along black dogs, mind you."

"But, I was told you would save us. Don't you purify demons like priests do in movies?"

"It's exorcism, as in to expel, not to purify. Might sound the same, but there's a little difference."

After all, the person's going to be broken along with the demon. He'll be normal again, but social rehabilitation is hopeless.

And look, real demons are rare, period. What you buggers are afflicted with is just a sickness. It's only a slightly special mental disorder, so just please stop calling yourselves that.

"Anyway, I am not a priest. A priest isn't going to be able to heal your sickness either. Just deal with it yourself or go under the care of a b-i-g hospital. From what I'm seeing, this mutt doesn't have any interest in you."

"IT HURTS SO MUCH."

I could see noise. For a second, I saw an abandoned building with puke all over the floor. Like a CD with a ghost hidden between the tracks.

"OKAY. The audio must have jumped a bit so I'll say it again. Go to a damn

hospital."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! I told you, I told you it's something else! I, I'm not sick, I'm not sick! Until now, I did fine on my own and did exactly what Mama said didn't I!? I studied everyday, got good grades to make Mama happy to make up for Papa being gone, but why do I have to be told that when I've become a little broken!"

The concrete wall is twisting.

I mean, it's melting. The excitement of the figure's emotions is melting the hallway itself. This is dangerous. I could get melted along with it if this keeps going on.

"Whoah. Whoah, whoah, wait. Seriously, you're freaking me out, so just wait...Relax. My bad. I shouldn't have assumed that you, a complete stranger, was sick."

I could say the same thing about treating a complete stranger like he was a priest, but I won't bother pointing that out. Say the wrong thing and I will be killed. Doesn't matter if this is a dream or not, it's really not a nice feeling to be killed.

"But, don't you agree that it makes more sense to call a doctor instead of a priest? Now you're saying that you're not sick, but personally, I think it beats being called demon-possessed."

After all, you do get treated like a human being, and either way, you're still not going to be normal.

"How am I supposed to be okay with that! You don't get it! There's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with me, there is seriously something wrong with me! It's not normal, I know what I want to do and what I don't what to do, but I'm doing both! Mom is saying I'm sick but this kind of sickness doesn't

exist. This is demon possession. It's not my fault I'm not recovering, it's the demon's fault!"

The figure shouts. The concrete is melting, it's melting. I'm freaked, I'm freaked. Why's that? Because my cheek's starting to feel like it's melting.

"Whoah-hoh, shit. Come on, give me a break. I don't want to be digested in a place like this."

"Then take back what you said. Say that I'm possessed by a demon."

He points out my error sharply. Grr, damn nutjob. There's an intense difference of enthusiasm between you and me here that's not making this easy for me.

"Roger. So, let's assume a demon is possessing you. I think that's actually rather embarrassing. Anybody can get sick so that's something that can be empathized with. But getting possessed is, see, there's this image of ostracism with it, yeah?"

The dissolving of the walls is slowing. The figure is pleased.

"No, no. You're a priest but you don't even know that? Listen, in the West, demons possess people that don't believe in God. Demons expose the dirty hidden parts of people and make them sin. It's not a sickness. If it was, there wouldn't be anything else to it besides recovering from it right? But demon possession is different. As long as the demon is gone, person is cleansed of his sins by exposing them all."

Uh, this is not the West. Also, Japan doesn't have the right climate for sin and punishment to spread like epidemic diseases. The ones that are irresponsibly spreading it and indiscriminately infecting others aren't celestial, they are artificial and calculating fakes.

"Oh my, is that so. Wow, you are a devout Christian. Well then, why don't we

put aside the cleaning out the skeletons from the closet part? Okay, so what is it then? If you hadn't even known about God, you wouldn't be possessed by a demon?"

"Yes, that's right. Knowledge and faith are different. If I hadn't known about God, I wouldn't know about demons. That's why, I,"

Ah, ah, ah, ah hah, ok, ok, ok.

"Basically, what you want to say is that God and demons are the same?"

Could also call them a set or partners in crime, but hey, it's not like it was either of those. The figure seems to be getting happier and completely stopped melting the concrete. Immediately after, it reverted back to the original two-floored wooden building and my dear middle-class hallway appeared. Woo-hoo. I could now see the door to the bedroom and as long as I open the door, it's adios to this sucker.

"Don't you see? God is using demons to test us. I'm being tested. I was chosen. If only this demon would leave, I could have a normal body again! I could be normal again, but everyone makes fun of me. This, isn't a sickness. I know it, there's somebody else, not me, that's making me into this. Yes, that's it, I hit Mama, I turned my room into a mess, I'm being made fun of by all my friends because God is trying to save me!"

"Ah. No, that's,"

I hold back what I was going to say. I'm not a fan of saying this and that about another person's values, and I don't think it's going to be amusing if I point it out this time either.

"I somehow understand your lingo. But, why are you talking to me about this?"

"Why are you asking me that? Aren't we the same? *You're also missing a part*

of yourself."

I put my hand on the bedroom door.

"Don't get chummy with me, stranger. I'm one of the eaten, you're an eater. Don't ever say we're the same life form just because we look alike."

Bang. The door opened without any resistance.

White and black. Good, from this point on, it's the Kizaki business.

The bedroom I stepped in was enveloped in faint darkness. The shutters are closed, the only lighting is coming from a mini bulb. Maybe it was from the lack of ventilation, but the room is like a sauna and hard to breathe in. In the bedroom, there are two beds. Sitting at the furthest bed is a man in a business suit. He doesn't notice me. His head is drooped powerlessly, with his back facing me. Going by his build, that's got to be the head of the household. Unlike the two on the first floor, this guy's neck was normal, still has the shape of a normal human being. In short, he is alive. Well, no shit. If he wasn't, he wouldn't be able to make a phone call saying that the three of them happily committed suicide.

I keep the sound of my feet stealthy. Kizaki's back is facing me. He might have noticed me, he might not have. The sight of his slumped back was like an art museum on the brink of collapsing. Distance from bed is about a meter and a half. Closing in by three more steps will give me the distance I need to be able to spring on him, *no matter what syndromes* he has. Or would have, but something got in the way. There was a *thump*, as my feet made contact with something. The hell? Crap, hey, this is kind of big—

"_____"

It, was the body of a person, eyes wide open, and dead. Policeman cadaver. Two of them. Both of them, stomach to the floor, with their necks twisted fully.

"Good evening. I didn't think you would come so quickly to save me."

I raise my head by reflex.

Instantly, I stopped breathing from horror.

——The corner of the room.

There was a large full scale mirror, reflecting the figure of Kizaki. Our eyes met. Not good. We both became aware of each other's presence by the mirror, and,

"Look him in the eyes and you will die."

"——, ah,"

The muscles throughout my body spasm. Hurts. Like my entire body had been stretched out by a roller, but is being stretched out again and again and again. As a bonus, I can't move not even one of my fingertips. This is too powerful. Just becoming aware that our eyes met for just one brief instant turned my command system into muck.

Two dead bodies with their necks twisted by my feet. A middle-aged man with his back facing me, gazing at me. A dark room as steamed up as a sauna. No, I mean it, this is scary. Can't even change the line of sight because I can't move my pupils. And excuse me, even more pressingly, I am having a little difficulty in oh, breathing since I can't send commands to my body.

"You must be that, what was it again? Oh yes, you must be that exorcist that eases the possessed. ...Oh? Aren't you Arika-kun, from the Ishizue family?"

No reaction from me since our eyes are still meeting. I'm helpless until he cuts off eye contact.

"That's right, you are Arika-kun. You were just discharged from the hospital weren't you. The reason you were admitted was, aaah, what was it? I'm sorry, I've been busy so busy with work lately that I haven't been a good neighbor. The

daughter's been pestering me for money so she could buy you a gift for a visit to the hospital, but tell me, did she even see you once?"

Did she? I definitely wouldn't know if she really did visit. Oh. Wait a minute, weren't visitors not allowed at that hospital?

"Oh, damn. I'm, you see, I apparently am afflicted with that thing you people call demon possession. I'm keeping myself in this room to be alone until an exorcist comes. I want to avoid contact with people as much as possible. I don't want to be reported to the police and I certainly don't want any awful rumors to spread. When you become as old as I am, what society thinks of you becomes the second most important concern in life."

Kizaki raises his head gradually. Kizaki's ready to kill. Whoah, whoah, hold on, it's me. Hello, the exorcist is ME. Don't get hasty, if you want to talk, I'm all ears.

"But, that's all because there's a family to support. You saw my wife and daughter below didn't you? It's been one day since then, but I do hope they haven't started decaying yet. It is September but still summer after all. I wanted to keep them in the refrigerator but they're not going to be able to fit. It would have been nice to do something before the neighbors complained, but oh well. It doesn't matter anymore. No actually, it never mattered in the first place, but for some reason the two of them followed my example and died. How absolutely meaningless. Up until the very end, my family had to become a burden."

Kizaki slowly turns. His eyes, that had met mine through the mirror, are slowly facing me.

And at the same time,

"No, I won't do anything to inconvenience you. Before I kill any more people, I will kill myself. I really should have been dead long ago, but for some reason I

am the only one that can't die. Last night, *I did twist my own neck after all.*"

The neck.

My neck, is turning at a speed matching Kizaki's.

"I wanted to die by myself. I've been lying to my wife, you see. The company, I quit it a week ago. I'm tired. I'm so tired. I was so tired that I hadn't realized that I had been tired until now. I'm already over 50 years old. Isn't it about a time that I'm allowed to become free?"

If the neck of Kizaki, back facing me, had been at 0 degrees, it's now at 20. Not good. I think I have a good idea on what the mechanism behind this demon possession was.

"But my wife objected. *Don't quit your damn company because you want to, your body doesn't belong to only you, you have the obligation to take care of us,* that's what she said. It was horrible. I've been married for a long time, but, Arika-kun, the hysteria of a woman chills passion incredibly. Sometimes I think, that's a trait that only women have. Us men have too much pride to act as childish as they do."

40 degrees, 60 degrees. As if to copy Kizaki's neck, mine was also turning. Speaking of which, at 90 degrees, my neck will be almost completely facing the side. Beyond that, ah well, no matter how much I put things in my favor, 120 should be my limit.

"I'll make it clear. I didn't want a family suicide. I just wanted to be alone. Because, oh, I don't know. I quit in the first place because, oh, that's right, I made a major blunder, even at this age. I tried to fill in figures by raising money, but it wasn't enough. My superiors told me to go hang myself, I was up to my neck in debt. It was impossible to repay everything while I was still alive."

90 degrees, 100 degrees.

The bones in my neck creak sharply.

My neck isn't going to turn any further. That's the way the human body is built. But Kizaki's neck movement was actually smooth.

I figure that the stuff inside probably changed to have a sliding configuration. 360 degree rotatable and multidirectional to boot.

"That's why when I planned to die by myself, my wife and daughter said no. No, that's not quite what they said. They said that if I truly wanted to die, I should find a way to die that leaves them money. Oh, how utterly stupid. You people, the reason I want to die is because I'm sick of that. They couldn't understand that even until the end. That's why I committed suicide in front of my wife without saying anything, but then something foul must have taken control of them. *My wife and my daughter both followed my lead and killed themselves by twisting their necks.*"

Excuse me, but I believe that was your doing?

120 degrees. 130 degrees. The neck is turning. Lead on by Kizaki, a demon possessed, the necks of the people around him turn.

That's the medical condition he gained from demon possession. The affected site is the neck and the function born from that is instigation. The cause? Overwork.

Go to hell. Kizaki stopped thinking to keep himself from realizing what his condition is and kept repeating his homicidal suicides. People that make contact with that old man's eyes are forced to copy his movements. Gimme a damn break. That guy's neck might be able to do that because he's got a sliding one, but human necks do not turn.

I'm going to die. A few more seconds, and I,

"But still, I thought about it. If it's my duty to support my family, then it also

should be my family's obligation to die with me. After all, they can't live without me, isn't that right? If that is true, they should die with me. And my wife and daughter did just that. I can't stand it. I didn't think they'd go that far to tie our lives together. Damn it, family love, really is an unconscious hell. "

Kizaki's face turns completely backwards. An exact 180 degrees. Kizaki's neck turns smoothly, while mine turns roughl-, *snap*.



Sniff, sniff.

The black dog is looking for the sliding neck. The room is dark, but that isn't a problem. The black dog is blind and thus never needed light.

The left arm which lost its prosthetic arm, hooks a formed formlessness from the neck which lost its neck.

———Attaboy.

Okay, Hatred (tentative name)-chan, it's time for dinner.

1/junk

The sky is near.

When I woke up, my vision was covered by water.

“Ah——eh...?”

The sky, has turned into an ocean.

Sunlight is a shade of white. Light, while shimmering with the currents of water, pours down on me and the stone room I'm in. Inside the clear blueness, the current violently swooshed as the outline of a fish passed.

Swimming in the ocean above my head, was an enormous fish.

The figure of the fish brushes against the light. Its body length is a little more than two meters. If I had to go by just the silhouette, it's a shark. I don't know what kind of fish it is. If somebody asked me if sharks can live in fresh water, I'd have to pause a bit. First off, I can't tell if that even is a fish.

The shadow distances itself. Probably because it didn't like me looking at it, the fish went higher...deeper into the ocean and disappeared.

Felt like the sky and the ground were reversed. But I'm used to it. No problem. That's a glass ceiling and above it is a huge water tank. Nah, a little different from that. The room I'm in is underneath a huge water tank, would be the correct way of describing it. I'm just in an underground chamber and the ocean above my head really isn't the ocean, but just an old storage tank. This crazy water tank ceilinged chamber is an anachronism that might as well be a room taken straight out of a medieval castle, you see.

I'm at the outskirts of Shikura City. In the home of 迦遼海江^{K a r y o u K a i e}, which lies in

the forest.

“Oh? *Arika*, you’re awake?”

An androgynous voice came from the canopy bed at the center of the room.

From here, I could only make out a shadow and not the face from here, but that’d be the owner of the room. Well actually, I wouldn’t be able to see anything but a shadow no matter where I try to look from. That bed’s been calculatingly positioned in a way to ensure that no one could get a glimpse of the face unless they were standing right next to the bed.

The underground chamber is built like a giant square box. The ceiling is glass and around it are walls of stone layered like brick. There are doors at all four sides of the room, but I’ve never opened any of them other than the entrance at the south side. Inside, virtually none of the everyday essential furnishings are present, the only electrical appliance being a small fridge in the corner. Piles of antiques are scattered with almost no semblance of order throughout the room. Depending on how one were to look at it, it could also be a storehouse for junk.

“Sorry, fell asleep. Needed anything while I’d been sleeping?”

“No, nothing important at all. But, now that you’re awake, do your job. My throat’s dry. Bring me some water.”

I’d just woken up. Maybe as an after effect of a bad dream, I make sure my neck isn’t twisted and raise my body up from the sofa.

This room doesn’t have any running water. The only water is the distilled water that’s been stocked up in the refrigerator. I walk slowly to the corner, over to the mountain-like stack of globes, and the refrigerator partially buried by that, and *pop*, open the door with one hand.

...Well shit. A fridge full of yellow shit.

“There’s nothing but colored stuff here!”

“If there’s no water, that will be fine too. If I have to drink something, then I’ll have grapefruit, okay!”

Sure is healthy for someone bedridden. Might even be more energetic than me sometimes because *Kaie* watches out for that kind of stuff. If being picky about meals really makes a difference with homo sapiens, that must mean people like me don’t have much time left on this earth. Oh, but don’t worry. We omnivores love junk food. Two times the tastiness since it keeps meals cheap and cuts down a needlessly long life span.

While bravely putting up with the treacheries of the lightly carbonated fast food beverage, I pour the light yellow into an oh-so expensive glass. There’s a man with one arm reflecting off the mirror on the wall to the side of the fridge. Not a pleasant sight. The man is missing his left arm. Nothing from the upper arm down. Me, I think it’s actually damn cool since now I look like an evil robot, but that bravado doesn’t make up for the inconvenience of having only one arm. Two years ago, I lost my left arm in a little accident. In fact, it’d been lost so completely and perfectly that it left people baffled about just what one has to do to remove it so cleanly. Luckily, the only thing I lost was that and there hadn’t been any danger to my life. One and a half years of rehabilitation and I got discharged. Pain in the ass for job searching and socializing, but nope, no dissatisfactions with the one-armed me. I am somehow managing to get some small time cash with this dull part time job, so yeah, I’d say I am one of the fortunate. About the only thing that bugged me was that time I discovered I couldn’t tie shoelaces by myself. Now that was a shock.

“Oh, hurry, hurry. Run *Arika*, run!”

I close the fridge and hurry over to my spoiled employer. I'm having trouble walking. I guess I must have fallen asleep with my neck in the wrong position.

"Thanks. It's actually been five hours since I last had something to drink."

The master of the room slightly raised the neck and took the glass.

A black, artificial right arm. Karyou *Kaie* gulps down the yellow fluid without hesitation.

"That was delicious. So, you were moaning. What was that about?"

"What, like the feeling that I'd been movie hopping theaters for the lousy late night showings. ...Oh wait, you wouldn't get that."

"Nope, can't say I can identify with that. I've never been to a theater before. Besides, is there even such a thing as an entertaining late night show?"

Golly, why yes, there are, a whole lot. The fool has the idea that a late night showing is the act of shitting out third-rate movies that can only be shown in the middle of the night. I'll let you know that nowadays, late night showings are better for actually enjoying movies, okay? ...But no point in explaining this to someone who doesn't understand the fundamentals of movies.

"Sorry, bad example. Basically, I'd just had a dream of something nasty that happened a while ago."

"Oh really."

Kaie looks at me with a blank face. This, is my employer, the owner of this underground chamber.

First thing to be noticed at a glance is the artificial arm. A black plaster arm extending slenderly like a mannequin was attached. In other words, just as armless as me. However, *Kaie's* a mischievous critter several notches higher than the likes of me in the outrageous department.

Age is 14 or 15. Silk-like, long, black, hair and a pretty face that would knock

out any man. But watch out boys. This, is a *man*. Mortifying, but yes, a *man*. This is coming from me, the guy that got knocked out by his looks at first sight, so there's no mistake on it.

Name's Karyou Kaie. Pain in the ass, so I just call him *Kaie*. This snotty punk, who'd seriously be like a princess if he just shut up, is a work of art that God commissioned on a whim. At the same time, he's also evidence that God has no taste.

"So, then, what kind of dream might this nasty dream of yours be? Hours of seeing something like that does stir up my curiosity. T'was quite the mystery as to how you could manage to sleep the entire time in such agony."

He asks me in amusement. He's bored all year long so he's voracious for anything interesting.

"...Look, I already told you, it was a nasty dream. I'm still feeling nauseous here and the last thing I need is to remember it. I was about to die in it."

Well actually, I definitely did die back there. My neck was twisted after all.

"Oh, you saw a dream where you were about to die? Ah, so that's why you were screaming things like 'Oh help' or 'Please stop for the love of God!'. Oh poo. There would have been real entertainment if you'd only slept a little longer."

Is that supposed to mean you wanted to hear my death scream.

"You're sick. If you see me moaning, wake me up dammit. What, you enjoy seeing people suffer? Do you get turned on by the panting of men?"

"Mmmm, it depends, but yours, *Arika*, was quite the treat, you know? I don't know what happened to you, but it was a disconnected and interesting jumble of somniloquy. Oh, but that demonstration of your shameless and wonderful true colors was more than appetizing enough."

The punk then thanks me for the meal and smiles happily.

“_____”

...Oh snap. I just had to get charmed by that. I don't want to admit it, but it's attractive. It's the ultimate smile. If you're a man, you can't resist it. The truth is I hate the guy, but I love his smile. One day, this dilemma must be resolved.

“...Sigh, oh yeah, what a riot. Gee, depending on how I think about it, I've been raped for two hours? You sadistic shit and your twisted denial play. You'd better give me compensation if you don't want to get sued.”

Two hour rest so going by the love hotel conversion rate, that's 5000 yen.Wait, is 5000 yen for two hours worth of human dignity expensive or cheap? I guess it's expensive? Not really something you could put a price on.

“I should be the one saying that. *Arika*, your day hours are running on my money. I can use it however I want, and you, you're obligated to meet the expectations of me, the employer. But even then, you won't talk to me, so naturally, I do have the right to pass time analyzing your sleep talk.”

He humphs and turns away his face looking disgruntled.

How to pass time. That was the predicament of the life of Karyou *Kaie*. He can't leave this room. No, he can't even get up from the bed without help.

There's a simple reason for that. All of *Kaie's* limbs are artificial. God is cruel. After all, he not only gave *Kaie* a face that couldn't be any prettier, he gave him a body that couldn't be any more restricting. If I became an evil robot by losing only my left arm, then limbless *Kaie* is the leader of the forces of darkness.

My job is to attach his prosthetics in the morning and take them off in the evening. I'm paying for 80% of my living expenses with this. I mean it's great that it's a job that even a one-armed guy could do, but something about this feels unhealthy and wrong. Taking money from a kid that can't move by himself? That's worse than being a gigolo.

Then again, this leader of the forces of darkness was born in a wealthy family and him paying me was something of a pastime to him, apparently. *Kaie* himself isn't going to have any problems with any of the basic necessities for the rest of his life, plus he's got prosthetics that fit him perfectly. As long as he wears them, he can do most things. On the first day of work, he just leisurely walked to the bathroom with his prosthetic legs. Yep, that's *Kaie*-chan, the rich kid with the awesome prosthetics, but performance and comfort are two different things. Seems that no matter what, prosthetics just don't go well with *Kaie*, so most of the time he's lying on the bed like he is now.

Yeah, prosthetics are at any rate, stifling and painful. *Kaie* only has his left leg and right arm on at the moment, probably because he's not in good shape today. Meaning that——

I probe the corner of the room....found it. The black dog's crouching at the corner of the room. Has the appearance of a monster from a picture book. With no eyes at birth, the black dog will never feel light even once in its life.

But don't underestimate it. When that dog hunts, it hunts borrowing human eyes——

"*Arika*...? Oh wow, are you really all right? Your face is a mess. Why don't you have a drink and relax a bit?"

"No, my face isn't a damn mess. I'm fine. No need to worry. And no, I'm not interested in a water-less and beer-less kiddie fridge."

"Then, how about eating something? You're hungry aren't you?"

"Might just be me, but isn't that logic broken? What good is eating going to do when I feel sick? You're going to be charging me too, am I right?"

“Why, of course. I’d deduct it from your salary.”

“See! That’s bully, ice man, scrooge, overlord-class servant oppression. No thanks, besides, it’s only for the afternoon. I’ll be better once its night, so leave me alone for a while.”

I wave my hand at him to shoo him off.

Whoops. *Kaie* can’t move from the bed so I end up returning to the sofa. The best part of this messed up chamber is how comfortable this sofa is. It’s so comfortable it’s almost unbelievable. I’m confident that I can sleep for three full days straight on this sofa.

“———So I take it that the dream was about the Kizaki job? The exorcism you performed one month ago at night? You didn’t have to hide it.”

Kaie sulks. Your persistence is making me want to sulk.

“....Yeah, but, how the hell did you know?”

“Well you had been shouting out while you were sleeping stuff like, oh, ‘Kizaki, stop!’ and ‘I’ll send your ass straight to the moon!’ For someone that was about to die, *Arika*, you were being rather peculiar, don’t you agree?”

He cackles. That snotty punk. He laughs with a crescent moon grin under the shadow of the canopy. There’s really something seriously rotten with him if he could still sit back and watch my groaning after knowing that much. In the first place, the reason why I got into that mess was largely related to him.

I should have quit. Just because I could make money on it, I wasn’t suited for that work. “I want to live as easily as possible” is Ishizue *Arika*’s policy, his ideal principle, his rebirth slogan.

And I ignored that and dug myself into a grave.

On that night... in that nightmare I don’t want to ever have anything to do with again, I stepped right inside that grave.

The house where there had been a family suicide, a freakish neck-rotating man. The epidemic of demon possession I said I never wanted to see again.



It first became known to the public about 10 years ago, or so they say.

Agonist Disorder, a sudden psychological disorder that's also been described as a receptor crash. It's treated as being one of the modern-day illnesses, such as depression and TKS, but probably the only people who know it by that name are the ones involved.

Anyhow, it refers to those psychologically crippled that are unable to control their own emotions. It's a name with only symptoms and no pathogens, so you might think, y'all don't be inventing some disease when you're just loony. But don't do that. Depression after all is a real mental "illness". Illnesses will infect even a healthy cold-proof body using their bags of tricks. If the stuff in someone's head becomes "off" in comparison with everyone else, it's not because the mind's sick, it's because there is something wrong in the body. Human beings are made up of mystery, wonder, and a solid design schematic. Breakdowns don't occur for no reason.

However, the only people that recognize it as a disease are the experts. The public generally calls those affected by it the "demon possessed." Why? Well, that'd be because they exhibit behavior that'd lead one to conclude they're possessed by demons. Personality transformation and breakdown are only light conditions. Severe cases go from obsessive-compulsive, self-inflicted harm and suicide attempts to discharging of hostility towards surroundings. To get straight to the point, it gives birth to criminals that inflict harm on others based on trivial

emotions.

“But, I mean, that’s not even demon possession, is it? It’s just a flashy, but still normal, disease. Why use some anachronistic word like ‘demon?’”

“Because the words ‘demon possession’ are easier to understand, I guess? Depression just won’t ring a bell for normal people, let alone the ones that actually saw them. But the image of ‘demon possession’ fits easily. People can accept the bizarre utterances that are made if it’s because a demon’s responsible for them. If there’s a demon inside, that’d account for their nearly non-human behavior, too, from their point of view. Still, ego transference to an artificial personality coming from that type of possession state died out a long time ago. I’ll add that the personas that the people in this country wear are generally going to be that of beasts too. Demons are spirits that, well, simply don’t appear in Japan.”

Yeah, demon possession was originally nonsense talk from our pals outside this island. Theirs work on the basis of 1 to 6 billion, with Team God (1) getting the absolute advantage. In turn of the century Japan, demons are a concept that can only live in a religion with just one God.

“Pathetic. If they have to use something, they could have picked Inugami possession². More familiar and more established, that’s my opinion on it.”

“Nah, it might be easy to understand, but it mustn’t feel established. No matter how much faith has died out over here, the Japanese are still Japanese. We’re going to be sensitive to the words ‘beast possession’ in one way or another, but with demon possession, it’s more distant, more game-like. Wouldn’t you think that it’d be both strangely realistic as well as boring if it was only a disease that had already been in this country?”

² Dog spirit possession.

“Ah..... so, what, ‘demon possession’ is more convenient for us?”

“Yes, yes. That’s why I think the demon possession that’s going around now is a modern-day sickness. There is an ending in sight, but since it isn’t coming at all, everybody’s building up a lot of stress. You could fall apart any day, the people around you could break any day – you’d feel secure thinking that way wouldn’t you, that you’re safe because you’re ready for self-ruin? I guess people are numbing themselves with a defensive screen that’s giving them that kind of mistaken thinking. It’s the current fad to become obtuse along with everybody else. The words ‘demon possession’ are just being used by that tide. Just as the name suggests, it’s the perfect sacrifice to lay the blame.”

Self-poisoning, self-generation, self-ruin, huh. Oh, you precocious little punk, if that’s true, then demon possession’s only a phenomenon and not even a sickness. You make it sound like it’ll be replaced by a new fad word after a year. But, the big problem isn’t in the theoretical. It’s that it causes real harm.

Demon possession does exist.

The people that have it really are mentally ill.

And, they are “super humans” like Kizaki that threw away their humanity.

These last few years, the number of abnormal crimes has been increasing. Most of the time, these incidents are passed off as being just another demon possession crime, but among these, only around 100 were processed as crimes by the demon possessed. This doesn’t account for even 10 percent of the total number of abnormal crimes.

“That’s why you mix 10 truths into 100 lies. Do that and both of them become lies.”

Well said. Even if someone has the misfortune of running into an incident like the Kizaki one, since the other 9 are normal “abnormal crimes,” it will be

categorized as a “suspicious but abnormal crime.” The public might be aware of demon possessions, but they’re totally unaware, under the real meaning, of what demon possession is.

A part of the reason why the name demon possession stuck. It isn’t because of the incomprehensible behavior of those afflicted. It is simply because they exerted abilities that humans don’t have. There are things that don’t escape from the realm of delusion, as well as things that are treated on the same level as mental defects. However, there are cases where it crosses that line and becomes “super human.”

Like say, a human that doesn’t die when he rotates his head and, on top of that, hurts other people. But yeah, I suppose it is natural for people to think that’s impossible unless a contract with the devil’s been made.

... Seriously, how damn stupid. In the age where excess civilization supply has ended, what the hell are demons? I don’t buy it. I’ve seen people that can’t be interpreted as being anything else other than people really possessed by demons, and I still can’t buy it. Normal people must not accept these things as real even if they are true. I still can’t acknowledge them and I probably never will for the rest of my life. Even if 100 Kizakis come after me, I will stubbornly laugh them off.

... Still, there is something preventing me from dismissing it as nonsense. There is a reason why I, despite being able to write it off as lies, can’t quash it as false.

The reason——is because the punk in front of me, is not some demon possessed douche, but a real demon.



“Say. What’s the border between real and fake?”

“Hmm? Border?”

“I’m talking about demon possession. The difference between someone that’s really possessed and someone that isn’t, the difference between a normal sickness and an abnormal sickness?”

I recall that incident a month ago at that house three buildings away from mine. The neck cramp I got from sleeping the wrong way aches. Yeah, that was---how’d I finish that anyway?

“Mmmm... you mean whether what’s possessing them is real or not?”

“No, not that. I had enough of the demonology sermon. I don’t care about the truth of the current demon epidemic. I’m asking why people get possessed by demons.”

“Huh? How dull. It should be obvious. Whether real or fake, a demon’s going to possess a particular type of person. Those guys have been fond of the emotionally weak for quite the time.”

“Excuse me? Don’t you have that backwards? Your mind gets sick after you get demon possession. Didn’t you say that demon possession is an illness?”

“Look, if you put real thought to it, you will get it. An epidemic infects people with low immunity, yes? The physically weak or the physically unfit are easily susceptible to external illnesses. If the body works that way, then so does the mind. *Arika*, when it comes down to it, you’re a kind person. I know you can’t tolerate it when the weak are pushed around for being weak, but this is a fact. Demons only possess people that had already been weak.”

He says this with a smug face. What I hate about him is this part. Just quit it with the character beautification.

“What...? You’re saying, demon possession is their own fault? Not even

counting physical build and fitness, people with a fundamental personality weakness are bound to become possessed?”

“Yes, weak people will be hit by demon possession. But that isn’t because they’re emotionally weak, but rather, the ‘environment’ around them has weakened. Even if the heart lies in the inside, it fluctuates according to external factors. Family issues; relationship with the friends, the Other; evaluation of Self in society. If the footing is poisoned, naturally, the person standing on it’ll also be infected. The mind then becomes sickened and that person becomes unable to adapt to normal society. This is an example of the environment not being built by us, but changing us. And taking of advantage of that, the supernatural infests the just-weakened mind.”

“You see, the concept of demons is the affirmation of weakness. They’re using that weakness as a breeding ground, so they’re going to be fostering that weakness with all their might. They’ll completely to destroy the host’s sociality, something they had merely lost sight of. Let’s say that there’s someone who says he can’t continue living without his girlfriend. This is just a preventive measure to deal with their pessimism, but with demon possession, they’ll actually commit suicide. ‘I’m sad so I want to die, but I’m scared of death.’ That’s the balance of a normal person. But these people are different. ‘I’ve had enough of feeling sad, so I have to die.’ There is a total lack of fear of the future. The really scary people are the ones that no longer care about their past and future and can only see ‘the present.’”

“... Can only see the present, huh? If people don’t think about tomorrow, that leaves everything up for grabs. If there’s only a today, then it’s fine to do anything in the present.”

Which would mean dying tomorrow isn’t anything to get all upset about. If

there's anything they're scared of, it's being anything but what they are in the present.

“So while us normal people have hesitations towards dying and anger at living, they're the opposite?”

“Yes, that's right. For people with nothing but the present, it's as if they'd just been born. They'll feel that everything around them is tinged with uncertainty. It's not as if they can't put the brakes on their emotions. People with emotional wounds, people that are liable to be possessed by concepts, are living beings that really can't go on living without a 'rule they judged for themselves.' Emotions won't break them, but they'll destroy themselves just by breaking a delicate rule that holds no meaning to anyone but themselves. It's easy for the supernatural to take hold in a heart on the brink.”

“.....”

The hell. After coming up with that kind of stupid rule, they get possessed by a demon when they break it, then turn into mass-murderers? Give me a break. If you want to die, die by your damn self. Don't take your friends and family with you.

“———Damn stupid. So what it amounts to is the whining of the socially inept? Right, right no bloody way I can figure that out. Like hell am I ever going to understand the feelings of some flake that gets driven into a corner by that kind of garbage.”

Displeased at something, the face reflecting in the mirror twists in hatred. Must have been because of some nasty stench. The black dog comes by me and crouches in content. The dog's getting friendlier with me by the day. Uh oh.

“Haha, of course you wouldn't. That's how normal people think after all. But just hear me out. In this case, you don't blame the weakness of the heart, but you

should think about what made it weak.”

“This is how the stock phrase should be. It won’t be, ”Feel shame in the weakness of your fragile heart!” It’ll be, ”Know the sorrow of the fragility of man!”

Kaie talks as if to pity them. He spreads his hand in exaggeration under the shadow of the canopy ever so courteously. But it’s nothing more than a gesture. He doesn’t possess the natural emotion of being able to feel sorrow.

But, I understood what he was saying in a way. Let’s say. Let’s say, there’s this guy who was hopelessly afraid of tap water and thought he’d die if he drank it. Out of some mistake, he accidentally drinks the tap water and then commits suicide, even though nothing unusual happened to his body.

Saying that’s weak is the vanity of the strong. After all, I don’t have the courage to die just from drinking water. It’s a feeling that the average Joe won’t get, but can’t you say that people that kill themselves for some stupid reason are psychologically strong to the point of madness? But, yeah, still. Nope, the fact is that I can’t even slightly deny that they’re the weaklings of society.



Times passes with even useless banter. Perhaps because sunset is near, the room gradually falls into darkness. This room will become pitch black when the sun sets since there is no electrical illumination. Lovely, the sun and the moon are the only sources of light. How romantic. All the girls’ll squeal in delight. But I’m a guy and not the least bit delighted. I’m starving, too, and it’s just about that time when I begin missing normal illumination.

“Okay, it’s about time for me to go. If I seriously don’t put anything in my stomach, I’ll die.”

My stomach twists and rumbles. Sounds like the gastric juice is dissolving my stomach walls.

“Eh? *Arika*, don’t tell me you haven’t eaten anything since morning?”

“You didn’t see me eating today, did you? And it’s more like I haven’t eaten since last night.”

“Oh wow!? You have to eat. Someone as unhealthy as you shouldn’t be skipping meals. I do have food here by the way..... how about it?”

“No. I am very sorry to say that the food over here doesn’t match my tastes.”

Mainly financially. It’s true what they say about people getting stomach problems from eating food they’re not used to.

“Huh, how rude..... But, now that I take a closer look, you really look pale, don’t you? Could it be that, you’re on a diet? Because, you picked up a beer belly from drinking all that alcohol?”

“None of your business. Look, I simply don’t have money.”

Right, I’m short of money all year long, but lately, things have really gotten bad. This job pays by the month, and damn *Kaie* despises paying in advance or daily. Ahahahahaha, go to hell, rich kid.

“Oh, is that it? If you have no money, just work. I’m fine with you working outside at day as long as you dismount my prosthetics, so why not try?”

“There’s no place that would hire me. One-arm-only, brainless, manual labor? Can you actually imagine that?”

“Yes, I can. There is work that only you can do, *Arika*. Exorcise demon possessions like that time with Kizaki-san. There’d been a bank transfer from Kizaki-san after that hadn’t there?”

“Yeah, but that’d been confiscated by *Mato*-san. Something about not taking money from volunteer work. Still, Kizaki-san’s fortune had already been used up

in repaying his debt and---”

Now I remember. After I exorcised that demon from Kizaki-san, he thanked me, while bemoaning that I should have killed him. And, the affected part of Kizaki-san, who had the most pitiable expression on him in the world, was.....

“————Kaie. Listen, back over there, the dog, it,”

“Yes, yes, about that demon possessed dog killer. My, my, *Arika*’s done his research.”

“Huh? By dog killer you mean, who?”

“Oh? You forgot? All right, this will be the seventh time I explain it to you. Since a month ago, there’s been somebody out there catching and killing dogs and cats. Apparently, that somebody has been removing all the stuff inside, and dumping out the skin on the burnable garbage disposal days. There had been nothing more than rumors in the beginning, but about two weeks ago, somebody saw the culprit and has been ranting about it being demon possession all over the place.”

“————”

I take out the memo pad from my pocket. Checking two weeks ago, the last week of September. Scribbling is the usual “*nothing big.*”

“I don’t know anything about that. But what, dog killing? That’s sort of archaic. There aren’t any stray dogs, even in the back alleys. If there are any, they’d be up in the mountain valleys or out in the country. But hey, did you know this? They say if you kill animals out in the mountains or fields, it’s called *hunting.*”

“No, these aren’t stray dogs, they’re house pets. At first, the dog killer caught

guard dogs, but is now going inside houses and stealing them. Thanks to that, there's been a sharp drop in the pet dog population of Shikura City."

..... Now that he mentions it, that noisy mutt next door was pretty quiet last night.

".....Is that so. So, was he taken under custody?"

"Location is unknown at the moment. The police have also got a search net out, but there hasn't been a full out search yet since the only victims are dogs and cats. But according to witnesses, the dog killer is extremely passive. Seems to be weak and I do think there ought to be a reward from *Mato*-san. *Arika*, will you do it?"

"No. I'm not interested and *Mato*-san will never give me money."

And——even assuming that he is affected by demon possession, it's not as if he's killed anyone yet.

"Well, well. 'Yet,' is it? That's my boy, the ex-patient. Never one to squeeze in predictions."

And he heard me. Friggin' sharp ears.

"Shaddup, be quiet. I don't give a rat's ass about that stupid story. Unfortunately, I don't have any friends that are dogs. As if it's any of my business if a bunch of mutts get killed."

"Wow, you're terrible. You're not going to do anything?"

"Hey, it's not something that us humans should get involved in. Vengeance's gotta be handled by the same species. If you want to catch him, go get Scooby Doo."

"Ugh, you have to be that adverse to it? Oh poo. Now, why are you being more stubborn than usual? With the Kizaki job, you gladly took it up for the money. Hey, *Arika*, could it be that you're hiding something? Like, oh, you being

acquainted with the dog killer?”

It’s a baseless suspicion, but I can’t deny it. As far as I’m concerned, the person I trust the second least in the world is myself, after all.

I check a month worth of memos. After what happened at Kizaki-san’s place, there haven’t been any particularly laughable scribbles.

“Yukio. Eating too much. Go on a diet. Watch out for vinegar.”

And there’s one. The date’s about one week before.

“.....Alas, whatever I wrote is beyond even me.”

Kaie has his finger in his mouth as if he wants me to show it to him, but this secret notebook is off limits to human eyes. Can’t show it to you even if you offer me that mysterious, finger-articulating arm. Nah, I really, really, do want one of those. Enough that I’d sell my soul.

“Well? Do you know the person?”

“I told you, no. Don’t ask stuff about me to me. And no more stupid demon possession talk. If you have to do it, do it like around now when the sun’s out.”

I put away my memo pad. Now then, 30 minutes until sunset. Almost the limit. Let’s finish up today’s job, shall we.



“I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Sent off with the usual stock phrase, I exit the chamber. I shut the door securely, then pass through the narrow stone hallway and walk up the stairs. I

rise up by four meters and open the door at the end, at last returning to the surface.

In the forest. The sun had already fallen and the area was covered in bottomless darkness.

Kaie's underground chamber is in the forest. No, I mean his room is in the chamber beneath the storage tank that is in the forest. The storage tank looked like a castle wall, it being enclosed by walls high enough that I have to look up. At a glance, it's an enormous, 10 square meter cube. It might be a strange object, but it's still an emergency water tank, next to a single tall lamp.

The concrete cube illuminated by the lamp, no matter how I look at it, looked more like a spaceship than a water tank. A sight this bizarre ought to be listed in tourist sightseeing maps, but nobody ever talks about it. It doesn't even seem like the people in the city government know it exists. Maybe the veterans over at the fire department know about it as part of Shikura City trivia, but I doubt that wisdom is going to include knowing there's something underneath the tank. The only ones who know about it are me and *Mato-san*, and well, some victims that have had some troubles due to the possessed.

“..... But really, just what is he?”

I met the owner of the chamber, Karyou *Kaie* two months ago.

Our relationship started when I'd been discharged from the hospital and had been looking for an artificial arm. *Mato-san* gave me an introduction to Karyou *Kaie*, saying that there was a dilettante with rare prosthetics. I hadn't expected much, and *Kaie* agreed to my visit on a mere whim. After that, I didn't get the arm, but he offered me the job of attending to him during the day, and I gave into the smell of money and accepted it.

The day I met him face-to-face, it had been night. I remember the water tank-like chamber of that bright moonlight night.

The first impression was horrible. A left-armless me and a limbless *Kaie*. And thus, the two of us limb-deficient wonders became a team --- not. Our first encounter was anything but that. There was a void of any feelings of kinship. The moment I laid eyes on him, I really felt like vomiting. Don't get involved with him. The creature in front of you is different from anything else you've seen before, or so the boiling of the blood throughout my body was telling me.

He doesn't have any arms or legs, you know? That's painful. Even looking at something painful uses up stamina. This is me, the guy whose new motto in life ever since he was discharged was that "I wanted to live as easily as possible." I didn't want to become friends with someone that would make me tired just by being near me.

"..... But despite that, Arika still came everyday, press period button."
Really, what made me take this job?

A possible reason would be the money, probably. *Kaie's* proposal was appealing. The work was easy and I couldn't complain about the salary. Two hundred thousand yen a month for just attaching and detaching limbs daily is too good to be true. I've been told by my heartless underclassmen that I'm living like a gigolo, but it's true indeed. This neck of mine has got a collar called a salary.



I walked for around 10 minutes and reached the road. Even if it is a forest, it isn't that big. Size is about the same as the grounds of a college. Given one hour, I could circle it.

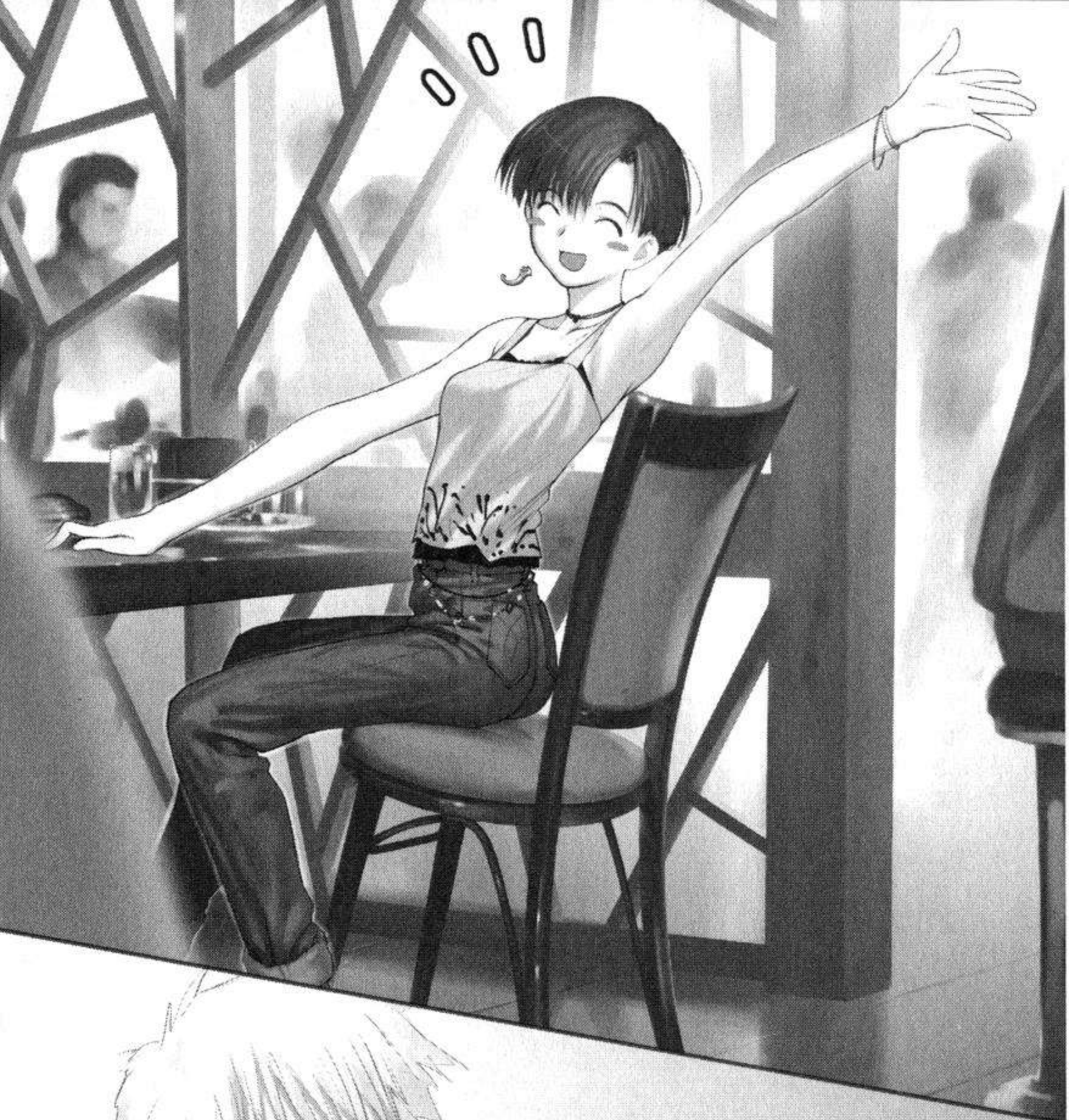
The light of civilization is far even once I'm out of the forest. More than half of town is made up of fields and mountains. No matter how much money gets invested in the station front, it's still a town out in the country, two hours away by commuter express from the urban center. Get five kilometers away from the station and you can be a part of nature, like I am now. Worst environment for modern kids to lock themselves up in their rooms. *Kaie's* room is underground so radio waves and mobile phones won't connect. His only means of communication is a black telephone that lies somewhere in that underground chamber. Oh, speaking of telephones. Check, check.

No mail, no calls. The time is exactly 7pm. Yep. I have perfectly missed the bus. There's a small bus stop on the highway right out from the forest, but the last bus is at 6pm. Five kilometers from here to Shikurazaka, plus two kilometers to get down to the station front, making for one long trip. This is going to hit my empty stomach hard. Work more, city bus.



Since fasting for one full day is actually tough, I went over to the usual pub for grub. And the name of the place, Dining Bar Nebula. Despite serving Italian food, the name is just simply and fundamentally wrong. On the inside, it's as large as a college classroom and is crammed with tables. No other pub can beat its frantic, bustling, and lousy atmosphere. The forty tables are almost all full. Ages go from 16 to over 30 and the pub interior is a clutter of alcohol, cigarettes, and chitchat.

So. In the middle of that chaos, there was this one person that looks at me, the new entry, and instantly raises her ears.



decoration
DD
isorder

“——Geh.”

“Ah, Sempai! Yoo-hoo, over here, over here!”

The eyes in the pub converge on me and the idiot.

Enter mysterious creature, who’s buzzing one hand up in the air (without paying heed to the people looking at her), and banging the table with the other. It’s clear she’ll run after me if I try to escape, so I give up and play her game and sit opposite of her.

“Sempai, you’re laaate! Were you at *Kaie*-san’s place agaaain?”

Tsuranui pouts as she puffs up her cheeks. She mentioned the time as if it’s a matter of fact, but we hadn’t even made any damn arrangements to meet.

“One club sandwich. Drink? No. Gimme water, water.”

“And he ignores me without a flinch! Sempai, you’re hurting my feelings when you blatantly ignore me!”

“Okay, okay, don’t cry, don’t cry, because you’ll annoy me. I’m listening. If you were ignorable, I would ignore you and that’s the honest truth.”

I push away *Tsuranui*’s meal, securing my own space from her occupied territory. From the looks of it, she already finished her dinner, and on the table were dishes of completely eaten pasta, salad, and cake. Damn rich as usual, despite being a student.

“*Tsuranui*. I’ll say this in advance, but I’m starving to death. I’ll listen to you once something gets stuffed in my stomach, so please shut up until the food comes.”

I put out my hand to silence *Tsuranui*, who looked like she wanted to say something. If I have to talk to her while I’m hungry, I’m really going to collapse.

“Okaaay. In that case, shall I also order something?”

“Excuuuuse me,” she energetically says to get the attention of the waiters.

貫井^{Mihaya}未早. Appearance: high school student-ish. Gender: female. Commonly known as: *Tsuranui*. An old tie back from high school that I can't get rid of, who's always been like this since way back. To sum her up roughly, she's cheerfully lively and a straightforward fumbler that can't lie. In other words, she's a Maximum Goody Two-Shoes. Seriously, I have trouble dealing with her.



The cheapest dish here is the club sandwich.

In contrast, the most expensive is the undelicious duck liver.

The most profitable items here for the pub are the alcoholic kind, but I'll stick with the food. So.

“Oooh. So 霧栖^{Kirisu}-san has been gone since last week?”

Munchmunch, goes the rich girl, 貫井 Mihaya, age 19, while eating her foie gras. The stereotypical modern kid that lacks self-control, who wants what she wants and eats what she wants to eat. I hope you turn into a pig.

“Yeah, he's out of town. He mentioned something about a daughter of a rich family getting hit by demon possession. He's going all the way down to Nagano to watch over her.”

Though, from what I heard, that demon possession sounded like a farce. Probably her trying to get back at her family or just killing time. It'd drive me nuts having to deal with her, but personally, I'd take the farce.

“Honestly, I also wanted to go, too. But there's this rule about people getting admitted once not being able to go to other prefectures. I get left behind, and Kirisu gets to have fun outside.”

I don't like the idea of getting shot by *Mato*-san either, so I left the good deal to my partner.

"Hey, wait, *Tsuranui*. I don't remember you being a strong drinker?"

Tsuranui drinks down the wine at an unbelievable pace. The decanter looks like it'll soon be empty.

"I'm a strong drinker. Oh, this is no fun, Sempai. Let's stop talking about demon possession! I'll barf if you don't talk about something brighter."

Terrifying. The terrifying part being that she's a monster that'll jump from statement to execution in no more than a few seconds.

If she says she'll throw up, there'll be a hideous sight waiting for me three seconds later.

"Hold it. Do not, throw up, *Tsuranui*. If I'm put on the black list here, the only regular place I'll have left is the nearby family restaurant."

"In that case, please talk about something brighter. Sempai, ever since you left the hospital, you've been talking about nothing but demon possession and have been a real party pooper. Why not talk about, oh, something more appropriate for a man and a woman of around age 20?"

Huh, yes, if I say so myself, I am a party pooper. But, forgive me, *Tsuranui*. The bright topics have been out of stock lately.

"Don't ask for too much. It's not as if the gossip about the loonies is anything new, either. Just what is bothering you?"

"Um..... well, in demon possession, people get taken over by their suppressed emotions, don't they? Then couldn't the same happen to me? I'll get the blues because of your gloomy stories then become demonized."

"When pigs fly."

If she gets demon possession, that'll be the end of the world.

“Ugh. So awful. So immediate. And that’s the one part of you that’s still the same as before, *Arika*-sempai.”

Tsuranui gloomily chows down on her dish. The amount of nutrition she’s taking is five times mine. I hope you turn into a whale.

“...Hey, you sure got some nerve doing that in front of me while I’m settling for a club sandwich. Could this be, oh, signs of obsessive compulsive eating?”

“Huh? Eh, Sempai, you’re hungry?”

“I’m hungry. This is the only thing I’ve gotten to eat today. I don’t even have one cabbage waiting for me at home.”

Ah, she stopped. *Tsuranui* knits her brows and hmms deep in thought.

“I’ll make an educated guess. In other words, you don’t have any money, but you would like to eat a little bit more?”

“Close. I don’t want to eat a little bit more, I want to eat until my stomach’s full.”

“Oh, I see. Mmm, if that’s the case, I’ll think about it depending on your move, Sempai. I’ll pay for your meal, so.....please be my boyfriend!”

“Sorry. I think I’ll just starve to death.”

“Grr, you piss me off! Jeez, why not!? I’m an intelligent and beautiful girl one year younger than you, don’t you know!? It’s a good bargain!”

“Nah, the payment and the work don’t match.”

“And he says that with a straight face.Sigh, dumped again, I am. And as cold as ever, *Arika*-sempai is. But, I’m weak against that part of you. ———Excuuuse me, I’ll take a double float pleaaase!”

Tsuranui buzzes her hand in the air. Soon, a melon float in a bucket-like mug appeared in front of me. Yes, as in the one with two straws, for couples.

“I lost this time, but in honor of the good fight, I’ll pay for your meal. Go on,

go on.”

.....There’s something wrong with this picture. Putting aside *Tsuranui* since she’s already obviously messed up, there’s something wrong with this store for having this on the menu. Actually, just from the name, there was something wrong with this place.

“*Tsuranui*. You know that I’ve got bad chemistry with soft drinks, don’t you? I can’t drink this.”

“Eh? You were?Oh well. In that case, shall we be a bit low-keyish in splitting this jumbo omelet rice?”

“Denied. Just stop with the sharing things between two. It’s not natural to halve one thing into two, you get me? I’ve never been good with that. Splitting and sharing a boiled egg makes me sicker than a bad horror movie.”

“Sigh. But Sempai, we have done this sort of thing before.”

“Whu, seriously?”

Crap. Did I do something in the day again?

“You forgot? Remember my friend ^{Fusou}扶桑? It was that day, the one where the two of us went over to her house, but since she wouldn’t eat the get-well melon we brought for her, we ate it together on the way back. As soon as I realized you had cracked the melon against a utility pole, you so calmly gave me my half without saying a word. Ah, the wonderful days of my youth. The Sempai back then had still been just a little bit more loveable.”

I don’t remember that. It’s completely slipped out of my memory. I close my eyes trying to remember, but what I got was this grainy, gravelly snow.

Being *Tsuranui*’s friend would make her a girl. Get-well present. Visit because she’s sick. Fruit that doesn’t get eaten. I always get the chills with

memories I can't recall.

"Eh, Sempai? You look a little pale?"

"Because I'm not getting enough nutrition. By the way *Tsuranui*, when was that?"

"When? This was around four years ago."

Ah, now that fits. Anything four years ago or earlier wouldn't stick unless it left a big impression. The thought of splitting a melon with her bugs me, but that was back when I was a kid. Back then, it must have been fun to share.

But more importantly, food, food. Since I'm appendagely challenged, my eating pace is slower than other people. *Tsuranui* is drinking her bucket float with a frown. Serves her right. In any case, she'll be quiet until she finishes drinking that.

"Oh, that's right! Look, look, Sempai, I bought a new cell phone!"

Goddamnit.

Unable to endure one minute of silence, she shows her brand-new orange cell phone. This is the fourth one she's switched to this year.

".....Uh huh, I don't care. But what is with this shiny orange? You might want to check to see if there's something wrong with your tastes?"

"Really? I think it stands out, and it's cute, though. Sempai, you don't like it?"

"It's not an easy-to-get-used-to color, isn't it... But, it's the perfect color for you."

"Eh? Sempai, are you praising me?"

"Yeah. You made a practical choice for a change, *Tsuranui*. You'll be able to find it right away when you lose it since it's so flashy."

Her head drops sharply. ...Yeah, well, it does stand out, but I have to admit

it's a charming phone. That kind of junk will turn into precious belonging with one bit of emotional attachment.

"Oh fine, whatever. The goodness of light colors just can't be conveyed to my dark Sempai. Anyway, my phone number has changed, so please register it. There we go, buttons beeped."

"Roger. I'll sort it later. You dumped your old one?"

I ask her while eating. My eyes are affixed on the club, my mind on to the sandwich.

"I still have it, but I cancelled the contract. I, have this dream of making a robot from cell phones, so I'm collecting them. That being the case, if you ever change your cell phone, could you give me your old one? That kind of bittersweetness like, oh, giving away your second button at graduation."

"Yeah, I'll give it to you if I remember."

Me, I don't have any attachment to my cell phone. The actual thing's a used one from four years ago.

"Yay! As a reward, here's a present from *Mihaya*-chan to my boring Sempai. It'll make your dubious sandwich hyper yummy."

Cheered on by that apparently, *Tsuranui* thrusts her orange cell phone out like a spring. From the looks of it, an image from a BBS was being downloaded.

"Are you ready? Okay, here we go!"

Let me see, I say as I look at the tiny liquid crystal display. I'm a sociable guy, truth be told.

The image switches to a movie. There's a familiar looking nighttime road. One second. Dog arfs noisily. Two seconds. Living bloodshot rubber ball-like lump of flesh enters. Three seconds. Head of dog smashed by lump of flesh. Four seconds. Lump of human flesh removes intestines from dog. Five seconds. Movie

freezes. Image is frozen at a sickly scene.

I choked.

“Mmmmm, shocking. Quite the spice, if I say so for my——yowch!?”

“Don’t show me crap like that when I’m eating, you dolt!”

Are you trying to get me to throw up what little nutrition I’m taking in?

“Aww, no way. This doesn’t get the Sempai seal of approval? “

“You have to ask that? You’re too addicted to the web. You’re an amateur and you shouldn’t be poking into anything dangerous. ...So, what gore site did you get that from?”

“I-It’s not gore. You can’t see the important part since it’s covered by the shadow. See, look, Mr. Flesh Lump is too big so you can’t see the dog.”

That’s not the problem. Oh and put away that damn cell phone. I can hear glopping even when the image is frozen.

“Tch. And here I joined a group of jerks thinking it’d help you, Sempai, but not even this worked. Your defenses are too impenetrable for me.”

The orange phone is drawn back reluctantly by *Tsuranui*, an organism shrouded in mystery that dislikes ghost stories but is totally fine with corpses. Yes, perhaps she is a monster?

“But, you’re intrigued, aren’t you? You know this is a picture taken secretly of the new rumored demon possession?”

“Huh? Say what? I don’t get. What do you mean rumored demon possession?”

“The one that’s catching and eating dogs. Sempai, you haven’t heard? That’s strange. It’s a name that’s been appearing in any chat for the past three days. He’s called *Yukio*. You don’t know?”

“No, first time I heard anything. Could you give me some details?”

Tsuranui's explanation was simple. There's been someone out on the streets since one month ago kidnapping and killing dogs. He was witnessed by somebody who then went around saying that the killer was demon possessed. A nickname has already been given, and thus the demon-possessed dog killer was known as *Yukio*.

Take out memo and check. Ah—uh oh. Looks like I met him. I wonder what kind of harassment I'll get from *Mato*-san if she finds out. Brr.

“*Tsuranui*, thanks. This really helped. Next time, I'll appreciate it even more if you talk about this kind of stuff at night like you did today.”

“By this kind, you mean what kind?”

“I'm talking about the kind that involves whether you live or die. And don't meet me in the day. If you don't want me to stand you up, don't phone me, mail me. Anyway, show me that movie one more time.”

“Sure, but you could also download this movie anywhere. You'll have better picture quality if you see it in your own room, Sempai.”

But I still watch. What happens is exactly the same.

“.....Too dark, can't tell much from it. So, someone who just happened to be around the area recorded this while hiding, huh. But wow, it's amazing what advances have been made in cell phones.”

You could say that they're the natural enemies of spontaneous criminal offenders. The materials that could be investigated range from phones to recorded footage, and up to the Internet. The phrase “isolated area” really look like it will go extinct pretty soon.

“No. It seemed that the person who took this movie had been after *Yukio* specifically. Something like, ‘I'll expose the rumored demon possession, so let's all

capture him.”

“.....That’s a unique hobby. No money coming from catching a sick man, though.”

“It’s not that. None of them care about money or justice. They’re just jumping onto the bandwagon because it happens to be the most interesting rumor.”

That’s it? It’s just people ganging up on an easy to understand target?

“Huh. *Tsuranui*, you don’t approve?”

“I hate it. Pleasure without conviction is, kind of, decadent.”

She makes the rare, complicated statement. A believer of justice who despises unprincipled and self-indulged trends. Admirable girl. As a reward, I’ll walk you back home tonight.



“Hey, Sempaaai. So in the end, just what is demon possession? Everybody’s saying that its depression, but do people kill dogs when they get depressed, I wonder? Hm.”

The vapid question echoes in the empty road.

Tsuranui’s apartment lies at the end of the manufacturing district, completely in the opposite direction of where my apartment is. It used to be a women’s dormitory for a bread factory. The rent’s ridiculously cheap.

“Sempai’s a specialist, no? Please gimme your expert medical diagnosis. I, want to know the truth. I asked Dad, but he keeps brushing me off with the line that it’s only a mental disorder.”

She’s either not happy about being ignored by her old man or she doesn’t like irresponsible rumors. *Tsuranui*, who only knows about demon possession from

rumors, is asking me a normal question for a normal person. But, I don't have an answer, either.

"I don't know. Next time, I'll ask someone who might know."

"Oh, *Kaie*-san? Okay, that's okay, but I still want to hear Sempai's opinion. Like, oh, what's the cause for sudden depression."

"Sigh, drunks.Well, yeah. There's stuff like bad atmosphere. Ominous premonitions, feelings like there's something in the dark, etc. That's the material that the demon possession talked about in society is made of."

"Hm, hm, bad atmosphere you say. Like awkward situations or like say murderous intent that's popped up between me and Sempai right now?"

"No. In that case, it's the mood itself that's giving off those vibes. I'm talking about smog, stuff you run into sometimes when you're walking on the street. Like, faint trembles in the air. If you pass by it without noticing it, you'll become irritated or depressed for no reason. Basically, you meaninglessly snap."

".....Huh. So that weird air is what causes demon possession? Um, the sour moments when you and *Kaie*-san fight are different, right?"

"Right. And I'll have you know that every moment between me and him is sour. Also..."

Using the example I gave, the materials for demon possession aren't in that chamber.

The atmosphere there is too beautiful. Because it's disconnected from the outside world, there's no space for pollution to enter. Before, I told him it was beautiful, but *Kaie* denied that while laughing.

"Saying this is beautiful because it's not dirty is dead wrong. This is all there is to my world. It's nothing more than clean, because it doesn't know of filth and ugliness. You don't call that beautiful. It's only emptiness."

.....In other words, humans finally become adults by having both purity and impurity. No matter how beautiful they may be, somebody that only has purity is going to be “alien,” not human.

“Sempai? Your face is looking scary. I didn’t hit a sore spot, did I?”

“No, nothing to do with you. Don’t mind me.”

While pulling the hand of the drunk, I pass by a large scale building.

Still, the more I walk, the more I run into factories. The pack of factories using up the land extravagantly, the privilege of the country, ought to look like a military base up from above.

“———Ah.”

Along the way, I spotted an odd factory. The building had an awfully organic look to it. It was a factory in the process of rotting, in which the tinge of the walls and the rust on the steel fence convey images of death.

“*Tsuranui*. Do you know anything about that factory over there?”

“What? Oh, oh, that’s a poultry plant. It was shut down this spring.”

“A poultry plant in the middle of the manufacturing district? Is that supposed to be a metaphor?”

“No, it really was a poultry plant. The one next to it is a bread factory, and beyond it are fields, so I think it works, environmentally speaking. But it was shut down because of the virus and then became a can factory.”

“A can factory? But isn’t it abandoned, I mean, *really abandoned?*”

“It is abandoned, isn’t it. Anyway, no one’s working there. There had been plans to convert it into a can factory, but the funding went dry eventually, so it was left like that. I heard that the household of the one in charge hung themselves. Now they’re looking for the next lessee.”

“Life’s a bitch. By the way, *Tsuranui*, about that movie. Think you might

know where it was taken? If it was uploaded for fun, there should have been something about where it was taken.”

“Mmmm, that’s true, but... that one was a copy of a copy. I don’t know who took it. Nobody really cares about where that place was. They just treat it as something to laugh at too.”

“Is that so. And you don’t recognize it?”

“Nope. Even though this is Shikura City, it’s still a big place. I don’t go to stores in the alleys that much either. Sempai, have you seen it before?”

Oh, my aching head. If you live around this area, you should as hell be able to notice.



We part ways in front of the apartment. Being a former girl’s dormitory, *Tsuranui’s* apartment was off limits to the male gender. *Tsuranui* is frowning, maybe because the alcohol’s still in her system.

“Are you going to be okay? If you’re feeling sick, go back to your room and throw up.”

“Ugh, I don’t feel sick. It’s been a while since I was sent back home by you Sempai, so I’m so happy I can’t sleep, no, I’m so happy I think I’ll die.”

Didn’t need to worry.

“Yeah, die, die. See you later. Don’t stay up late.”

“O-kay. Let’s eat together tomorrow too!”

I confirm that *Tsuranui* returned to her room, then walk forward. Now then. Before I go back home, I’ll take a little detour.



Mikishiro Water Shikura Plant #2.

That was the name of the abandoned can factory. Though, even though I say abandoned, it hadn't even gotten past the starting line. It was only a wreck that had been abandoned in the preparatory phase. The two building factory is vacant. Kind of like an empty box, and desolate. There isn't a vestige of the time it had been a poultry plant nor any automations for mass producing tin cans.

What's suspicious is the three-story company building. The windows are closed from the inside by veneer boards or something. The stains on the window and the drifting air are utterly rejecting the presence of people. It's as if it was a can packed with something fiendish inside.

The front entrance was locked, but I was able to get inside without difficulty since the back door was broken. Pitch black, tepid atmosphere. I'm used to both, so I proceed inside without a care. Making noise, I walk down the concrete hall. No light is leaking through the seams of the windows because the sky is cloudy. One inch ahead is darkness and I can't even make out the contour of the hallway. But regardless of that and without hesitation, I'm able to walk forward because this building feels familiar to me.

"Tch..... I must have come here during the day."

The further I walk, the filthier the air becomes. There's a terribly rotten stench, probably from water leaking somewhere. This'd be the part where a normal person with a normal imagination would start to become a little scared and hesitate. But, too bad for me, the workings of the stuff inside my head aren't normal.

———A healthy mind resides in a healthy body. It's a stupid phrase, but it's on the mark in a way. At the very least, it's a fact that I can't deny.

Two years ago. When I lost my left arm, I stopped feeling threatened by things. The body and the mind have the same form. Does losing part of the body also cause some emotions to go away? Oddly enough, with the loss of my left arm, a part of my soul had disappeared.

.....Let's say, there's this person that loses his ear in an accident. That guy, who recovered from the accident, but is still earless, then becomes infuriated by the slightest slander. He didn't become pig-headed because of the accident, he lost the emotion of "trust." Could be conceivable. I can't say outright that losing a part of the body doesn't cause the mind to lose anything. But at the very least, Ishizue Arika fits that case.

The bigger the damage to the body, the bigger the damage to the mind. A left arm's worth of damage, resulted in the complete scraping off of my wits, of my ability to "feel threats from external factors." To put it frankly, I've become "fearless." Except, since I'm not missing "fear," stuff that I think is scary is going to be scary. To be accurate, what I lost was an animal instinct, the defensive mechanism against threats.

According to *Kaie*, the advantage of this is that I'll be liked by most animals. This is because my caution's been weakened apparently, but I'm not happy at all if I'm liked by lions, tigers, and bears, oh my. Even if I can't feel threatened, scary stuff is still scary. And, that part in particular makes those animals even more pleased. What the hell.

Beep, beep, beep. The cell phone alarm fades into the darkness.

“Okay. Time’s up. I’m going home.”

A man’s got to know when a man’s got to leave. I stopped by the factory simply because I was curious. People with low caution will act just out of some stupid curiosity. Humans are the type that’ll walk straight into death if it weren’t for signals saying, “Uh oh, stop, this is dangerous.” Since I can’t determine when to pull back without those signals, I have to make definite rules and policies on it. The rule this time was five minutes. I commanded myself to enter and then go back once five minutes passed, no matter what.

As if nothing happened, I exit the building, leaving the factory behind me.

It’s obvious that there will be a new urban legend in Shikura City if I ignore it, but I don’t like the idea of poking into the bush just to get bitten. “So don’t come here,” you might say, but the rules are up because I can’t do that.

“.....Though, it is a ghost-story ridden town after all. So who cares if there’s an extra one or two haunted broiler buildings.”

Uh huh, uh huh. There’s already plenty of disturbing stories here, like, the family massacre in the mansion, the train of human hands running in the subway, the man-eating delusional housing complex. I don’t think I’ll be punished by closing my eyes to one or two potential ghost stories. If there’s anything I’m concerned about, it’s that there’s a ghost spot close to *Tsuranui*? It should be good enough if I warn her first thing in the morning.

I’m going back to my room. I satisfied my sudden curiosity. I don’t want to have anything to do with this demon possession. If I get involved, I’ll have to be responsible and be put face to face with some sin I don’t want to look at.

I have my hands full just taking care of myself. I can’t bear the weight of other people with a sense of justice that’s on par with putting a lid over something

that stinks. I only have one arm. I'm not smart, either. A weakling that can't become strong can only get by, by minding his own business as much as possible.

After all. No one's going to bail me out if I ever get in trouble, right?



What started this in the first place was the fact that there were no artificial arms that matched me. My left arm, which had no external wounds, which had no after effects, which was impossible to analyze, which had even been so far as described to have been “born that way,” rejected all prosthetics.

You heard me right. Not doesn’t work. Rejected.

Not only the ones that were able to grip and hold by broad muscular movements, but even the ones that were only shaped like arms didn’t work. It’s a contradiction, but when an arm is fitted, the left arm *that I had lost*, hurts.

The doctors judged that it was a psychological after effect. Consciously, I was still denying the current me and keeping my eyes away from the reality that I don’t have a left arm. Since putting on an arm means I’ll have to accept that reality, my mind will reject that arm with pain, or some bull like that. Oh I see, my, that is intriguing, but adding a reason doesn’t help. Doesn’t matter whether I defy or reject reality, I’m going to need a prosthetic arm. It doesn’t even have to be functionally good. I can’t relax without both hands.

During my stay, I tested out all the arms in the hospital. Seemingly there had been compatibility issues with the materials, leading to a variety of pain. There were ones that caused sharp pain, vomiting, even ones that made me lose conscious. In any case, there’d been differences with each of them. If that’s how things are going to be, I’ll be patient — and so I persistently searched for one that worked with me, and the last place I reached was Karyou *Kaie’s* underground

chamber. Looking at me, he said oh-so pleasantly,

“Aahh. That arm had been taken by a fake hadn’t it?”

And showed me the *one arm in the world* that matched me.

“Your arm, Ishizue-san, is only missing, but it’s still connected to you. As long as your arm doesn’t disappear, you can’t attach a new one.”

Kaie told me that even if the physical arm is gone, I still have the conceptual one.

“After all, you, don’t have any lingering attachment to your lost left arm, no?”

Those words, that point itself, was the first psychological wound I received since losing my arm. It was true that I didn’t think about getting back my left arm. To me, that left arm had never been there. Which was why—

Even if the physical form is gone, a form that had been *non-existent* from the start won’t change.

“Its sensations are alive. A normal artificial arm, for you, is like wearing clothing on the insides of your body. Of course that would make you so sick as to pass out.”

Yes. Even though the corporeal arm was gone, the sensations, and only them, were still there.

I’m talking about images. This is an extreme way of saying it, but as long as I close my eyes, my brain can perceive my left arm just like it used to, work it, even grab things. ‘Course it’s only a sensory trick. There’ll be times when existences flows into non-existence, but there’s no such thing as non-existence moving existence. The only things non-existent sensations can touch are the similarly non-existent forms. A formless sensation. Because it is non-existent, it cannot touch what exists, but because it is non-existent, it can intermix with the

non-existent. In other words,—

*“But——an imaginary sensation will accept the same imaginary beasts.
How marvelous, Ishizue Arika. That left arm of yours, is the ideal demon—”*

That damn punk, how’d he describe it again....?



The next morning, October 10th. Weather’s cloudy. According to the forecast, it was the same weather as yesterday.

I change and head to the outer forest. The kiddo is actually quite the sleepyhead, so I can get away with showing my face there by around 10 in the morning. The time is before 9 AM, the right time slot for getting there with time to spare, barring any unnecessary trouble.

I put in a call to *Tsuranui* while on the way of getting out of the residential district to head to the outskirts of the city. She doesn’t answer. Still sleeping? *Puhleaze leave a message and love after the beep!* Moron.

“Hello, this is Ishizue. I’m saying this just in case, but ‘bout ‘dat *Yukio*-kun. You have a chronic predisposition for victimization, so don’t get too involved. Also, you sound like a moron so change your damn answerphone.”

Hammering the nail into the coffin of last night’s business, I exited the region’s line of blocks that make up the residential district.

Sea of fields, smooth hills appearing on the horizon, a meaninglessly wide highway with little traffic. The village landscape was as it was in the past, with absolutely no change for twenty years.

“——Geh.”

People incongruent to the scenery detected. Patrol cars: two. Ambulances: one. Bright red Volvo that no person is ever going to lay their hands on, holy moly, that's a 40 Series: one. There's a group of people I don't really want to meet and one person I want to meet but don't want to meet. As a conditioned reflex, I jump aside, off the road into the grass where I watch and watch.

Something must have happened around here. Except, for that to be the case, there's too few people here, and I can't spot any field analyzing silhouettes.

.....Looks like most of the crime scene processing's already been taken care of. They've started to pack their bags too. Now if I hide a little bit longer, maybe they'll go away without notici—, nope, didn't think so.

The lady with her back against the Volvo gives orders to two officers. The two angry mugs that came over here grab me—no questions asked—and drag me over to the front of the Volvo by the arms like I was a little green man being manhandled by the men in black. *Slither, thud*. No respect for human rights.

“Fine work on having him come here voluntarily.”

That's our *Mato*-san. So that was voluntary!

“Yeah, you people can leave. I'll be talking with him.”

The two angry mugged officers saluted to the lady and quickly withdrew. The only ones left were me, the Volvo, and her.

This beauty of an obviously non-policewoman is ^{T o u m a M a t o}戸馬 的. The cold-blooded animal that I'd been under complete supervision of for two years.

“Stop lying down you piece of trash and get the hell up.”

Tomato-san spits out in disgust. This verbal abuse that sent shivers down my back even without being intentionally harmful is still one of the conservative

ones. It could be that she's immune to jokes, so the day I say Tomato-san out loud will be the day I have a bone-chilling torture waiting for me. Thus, that adorable nickname will be tucked in the depths of my heart, so I call her *Mato*-san instead.

"Why, hello. I thought I hid pretty well, but you found me in a jiff. You're sure sharp-eyed in the morning, *Mato*-san."

"Shozai³. You don't get yourself, do you? I can tell apart a one-armed, white-haired punk from even one kilometer away..... Oh for the love of... Don't act suspiciously when there are people around. In your case, one question about your occupation would have landed you in a police cell. If I hadn't done that, no one would have accepted otherwise."

"Oh? You mean you had them haul me here to protect me?"

"Of course. I'm your supervising officer. There is no way I'm going to let myself be called into a police cell because of some idiotic reason. Trash should do as trash does and stay locked up in the damn room. Don't waste my time."

Mato-san is the same as ever. Cool and beautiful. Riding into the crime scene with her own personal red vehicle is particularly stylish. After all, she's a Public Security special agent. You'd have to be a superintendent to voice your opinions to her. As a matter of fact, in Shikura City, she's invincible. Oh, and just to let you know, a superintendent would be the chief of police in Shikura City. *Mato*-san's treated as an assistant inspector within the department where she can boss around policemen just like the way she did a little earlier.

Being like this while still in her twenties, she's already dashing smoothly down Elite Street, but she's extremely unhappy, it seems. *Mato*-san's desire for career advancement is ten times that of a normal person. Convert the normal person into Ishizue Arika numbers, and the calculated result would make her

³ Alternative reading of the characters for Arika. MATO-san calls him this for some reason.

look like a diabolical superwoman a thousand times greater than me. And the true nature of that woman is a sadist that loves tormenting us weaklings.

“——Wipe that insolent expression off your face. It’s disturbing. It feels like I’m being laughed at by an animal at a zoo.”

“Please don’t complain about the way my face is naturally. So what’s the scoop? I’m curious, seeing that this is where I pass by to get to work.”

“My being here means it could be for only one thing, of course. We took into protective custody a patient still in his initial stages. He was being home treated, but he ran out this morning. I received a report from the parents, and this is where I caught him.”

Took into protective custody sounds nice, but the reality is it’s taking the guy by force. Being an officer in a Public Security agency that takes custodianship of people with Agonist Disorder, more commonly known as demon possession, is *Mato-san*’s main profession. The public dubs it the Coffin Department, after demon possession. Modern-day priests who save those inflicted with demon possession. Though, she doesn’t take into account human rights one bit.

“Huh. Busy from the morning, eh, *Mato-san*?”

“Oh, you’ve got that right. This isn’t my damn job, it’s the police’s. That boy only had a normal mental illness, not demon possession.”

She spoke grumpily. Demon possession might be called the new type of depression by the public, but it’s going to be obvious to a person who has seen even one real case of “demon possession,” whether it’s a farce or whether it’s real.

In real demon possession, there’ll be anomalies in a person manifesting severe symptoms that are not only mental, but physical. It’s not a psychological injury. It’s an ailment that appears physically.

The only ones who know this are the people that got involved. The one with

demon possession, the ones attacked by the one with demon possession, and the ones taking the one with demon possession into custody. *Mato*-san is affiliated with the most powerful of the three, the custodians. As far as demon possession goes, she knows way more than me.

“A normal mental illness?Has there been an influx of hoaxes?”

“Yes, there’s been an influx. Thanks to that, I received more unrelated work to plow through. At this rate, it will take me two more years to finish everything. I volunteered for this job to score points since I was under the impression that it was a one year job, but it seems the truth was different from what I heard.”

Mato-san, being the type that likes looking down at the world from a room in a high-rise, doesn’t like working in the field. But, she once confessed when spurred on by alcohol, that because she loves handguns, her dream was to run the director’s office at a shooting range. Scary, seriously.

“In any case, that small fry isn’t important. But more importantly, Shozai, have you heard of the new rumored demon possession?”

“The dog killer? I heard about it last night. Something like catching and eating dogs and cats.”

“_____ “

Ah. She is, kind of observing me with a cold glare in her eyes.

...Yeep. Please, please, don’t find out I’m hiding something.

“Shozai. I’ve said this again and again, but I hate your kind.”

“Well, of course. If you said you liked us, *Mato*-san, you would be the strongest pervert out there.”

“Stop putzing around and listen. What I want to say is that you social underdogs are an eyesore. Do you understand me? The instant you try to pull off a poor excuse of hiding something from me, I’ll have your ass re-administered. You

don't have demon possession, but you have something close. Normally, you shouldn't be able to function in society with your condition. It's easier for you to live inside than outside."

"How rude. I can manage admirably with one arm, thank you. I'm making myself useful to you, aren't I, *Mato-san*?"

"...Hm. If you really aren't hiding or *forgetting* anything, then fine. I am returning to the subject at hand. That dog killer I mentioned is what I'm really after. Like you said, pets are being caught, ripped to pieces, and turned into cuisine right on the spot. By cuisine, I am talking about the type that's eaten while still alive. Here, these are pictures of the crime scene."

She takes out documents from the car and shows them to me without hesitation.

I know I'm only being used, but I'm happy I'm trusted by *Mato-san*. She's hot after all.

.....But, still, these pictures are honestly a bit iffy.

"Er, *Mato-san*. This only looks like barf to me."

"Call it vomit, you idiot..... Yes, I know it's not pleasant to look at, but pass your eyes over everything."

"Ah? Is it just me, or does the floor look like it's been corroded?"

"Yes, it's been corroded. Forensics said it was from powerful stomach acid. Hahahaha, there's nothing these people can't do anymore, right?"

Mmm, well, there was a guy who could rotate his neck 360 degrees. At this point, it's a bit late to be surprised.

".....How~ever, there sure is nothing but vomit. What does this mean?"

"It means exactly what you saw. The demon possessed ate dogs, only to

throw up immediately after.”

“...? Wouldn’t that be because the dogs simply tasted bad?”

“Idiot. Would you keep doing this for one month if the taste was horrible? This person is both eating and vomiting because that’s what this person wants to do. The demon possessed is eating and is fully aware that whatever is eaten will be purged.”

...Eat, vomit. You eat, you still vomit.

I have a feeling I’ve seen a condition like this before.

“...Knowing you, I’m guessing the background check’s been finished by now. The demon possessed’s being called *Yukio* on the Internet, but do you have any definite identification? Oh, and any info on what caused the demon possession?”

“Hm? You already have the name?”

“I heard from *Tsuranui*. So, is there anything?”

“Background check is finished. *Fusou Yukio*. Home is located at Shikura City, Takanodai; has been receiving home treatment since four years ago, but ran away one month ago. No notification from parents. Statement from the mother indicated that she preferred it if her child stayed missing.”

”Huh? Treatment at home being...?”

“I don’t know if it was the cause, but *Fusou Yukio* was anorexic since junior high. Do you need an explanation on anorexia?”

“No thank you. I already know as much as the next person does.”

Anorexia. A modern illness characterized by the inability to take in sustenance due to psychological problems. There’s a tendency for people to think that anorexia is only a sickness where the person “can’t eat,” but a good deal of cases are actually ones where the person “vomits even after eating.”

Initially, because of some psychological reason, the anorexic will purge food.

After a long period of repeating this behavior, the stomach becomes weakened, and because the body becomes habituated to purging, the anorexic will continue to not be able to eat even after the psychological problem is fixed.

Since the anorexic can't take in satisfactory nutrition, he'll become exhausted from simply walking up and down the stairs. What's scary is that the anorexic doesn't realize this. He might look healthy, but his body is going to be constantly feeble. Stamina as well as immunity will both be lowered, and in turn, there will be times when someone might "starve to death" due to a light cold. Anorexia is a potentially life-threatening illness that can't be dealt with alone, and can't be cured without the understanding of the anorexic and his friends and family.

"...Doesn't make sense to me though. *Yukio*-kun's supposed to be fat. *Mato*-san, didn't you see the movie that's been circulated on the net?"

"No, I haven't--- ...Hold on. There's a movie of the dog killer!?"

"There sure is. Pick it up at your local anonymous BBS. You'll be able to see a blob clad only in underpants. Rather greasy and delicious-looking in a sense."

".....I see. It fits. According to forensics, the demon possessed has been eating five times the amount vomited. Approximately 60 kilos consumed per day. Two weeks of that and anyone will turn into a meatball."

60 kilos a day.....! Equivalent of two big dogs, huh? Yep, that'll make you fat. *Mato*-san's also a meat-eater, so she might really be jealous deep down inside.

"However, that feeding frenzy ended seven days ago. Those killings were sensational, you realize. In this one week, there haven't been any reports of dogs being killed. The number of strays has dropped, and the pedigreed domestic ones are inside. Since security's been toughened, it's no longer the case where food can be readily retrieved."

“Yes, well, that’s what happens when you hunt too much. So then, *Yukio*-kun hasn’t been eating for seven days?”

“Yeah. In the worst case, death from an empty stomach could be possible.”

Mato-san’s really worried about him.

I’m a little relieved. Despite what might be said, *Mato*-san’s on the side of justice.

“Phew. So it does matter to you if *Yukio*-kun starves to death?”

“It does. These people are still treated as invalids. If they’re poorly handled, I’ll be the one that takes the blame. Not only that, it’d be a public nuisance if one died while hiding. It’s as nauseating as finding dead roaches behind a wardrobe. If I’m going to kill one, I’d prefer to do it in broad daylight where the mess can be made spot clean.”

Correction. There isn’t a shred of justice in this woman.

“Um, *Mato*-san. I think shooting somebody in broad daylight is going to damage your career.”

“All I have to do is find some other crime. If they kill just one person, they become murderers, not invalids. I can get around it if I’m dealing with a criminal.”

Ah ha ha, you’re scary, *Tomato*-san. ———Who’s the genius that gave her government power and illegal firearms?

“That’s all I have to say on that. Shozai, you’re going to that boy’s place, aren’t you? Ask him for his opinion.”

She shoves the police’s illustrated guide to specially selected body waste and the forensics reports to me. *Mato*-san then goes straight to the Volvo.

“Why don’t you ask yourself? He’ll be delighted to see you.”

He did say there's something rewarding about teasing her. Plus, as far as I'm concerned, it's fun watching *Mato*-san getting harassed by *Kaie*, so I really want her to come with me.

"I have trouble dealing with that boy. He's eerie. The reason why you're able to put up with the atmosphere in that room is because you're fearless. That's the one point about you that I admire. Even when you were in the hospital, you acted the same way to all of the patients."

Engine started. *Mato*-san never pauses.

"Oh, fine. I understand. I'll go all by my lonesome. It's a piece of cake to just ask him, anyhow."

"——Excuse me? Do you really think that I wasted my time here for chitchat? I am telling you to earn half of what you're eating. These people should be kin to you, correct? At the very least, find that dog killing freak's lair before there's a new development."

"Again with the unreasonable demands... The kiddo hasn't eaten anything for one week, yeah?"

"If dogs were the main diet, that would be the case."

"Must be getting irritable."

"If that was me, I'd be starving."

"You mean I'd become the first victim."

"I'm fine with that. If you die, that saves me the trouble of having to crush one of you. The dog killer will become a man killer and a future demon possession candidate will also be disposed of."

She's a monster. A monster tomato has descended on the mortal plane.

"No way. Why do I have to get involved with some demon possessed kid I've never seen before?"

“I’m fine either way. If you won’t do it, I’ll just acquit your little sister of all charges.”

“I’ll definitely take the job.”

Super fast response. Super eager. Super scared shitless. If you let that psychopath out, I’d be a hundred times better off getting offed by the demon possessed kid I’ve never seen before.

“Good. Now, find the dog killer tonight. I know that you actually do have an idea as to where.”

“Geh.”

She saw through me. *Mato*-san clamped her seatbelt on tight, dashingly turned the handle, and zoomed out of the rural landscape at 80kph.



“My, my. So this is the dog killer.”

Kaie sparkles his eyes as he becomes engrossed in reading.

Since I didn’t want to be infected by his enthusiasm, I plopped myself on the sofa and gazed at the ashen ocean. The ocean above was peaceful and luckily for me, that blasted shark wasn’t there.

I hear only the flipping of documents. The only ones in the chamber are me and *Kaie*. His prosthetics are all assembled; all of them are black. If someone that didn’t know any better were here, it’s likely that he would mistake those as just being limbs wrapped in silk.

“Yikes, so this person really is munching on dogs. As a dog lover, I can’t forgive that, no sir. You’re going to die from parasites if you eat dogs!”

He’s extremely pleased. When he cackles like that, even I shiver.

“Incredible, 60 kilograms a day? Wow, wait, wait, *Arika*, did you see this!? One of the investigating officers opened fire! He opened fire you know, opened fire? ‘Due to being in an extreme state of panic upon encountering the suspect, I was unable to make proper judgment’, eh. Amazing, what he saw must have had quite the *inhuman* form.”

“Yeah, read it on the way here. That’s pretty impressive. The fella took five consecutive shots from a .38 caliber S&W. Normally, you’d die from that. Ah, wait. One shot should be more than enough.”

The shooting incident happened one week ago, according to the documents. *Yukio* fled, and hasn’t been seen since. It’s not certain if he was injured or not, but it looks like the reason why he’s been staying quiet since last week was because of the psychological damage of that incident. It’s not a good feeling to be fired at without warning I bet.

“What’s this, what’s this? Note: A piece of metal thought to be a bullet was found at the site.....The bullet was dissolved by a powerful acidic substance, which is thought to be body fluid secreted from the skin of the suspect.....Yikes, this demon possession is like a toad.”

He probably means toad oil. He’s using an old-fashioned metaphor for a kid.

“But this confirms it. The affected site is the stomach, the neo-site is dissolution. The cause isn’t known, but with this much information, that’s good enough. A demon possessed covered with stomach acid throughout the body, eh. If that acid can dissolve pistol bullets, bare hands and blades won’t work either, no. Now, how will she approach this? Nets won’t work too.....Eek, there goes *Mato*-san again. She’s requesting flamethrowers. Ahahaha, she got turned down. Let me see, as a compromise, there are orders to attack the respiratory organs, but neural tranquilizers aren’t very effective on...Ah. I see. Water curing, hm.

There's arrangements for the dispatching of a fire truck too.——This is too precise. *Arika*, is this person really a doctor?"

That's what I want to ask. When I met her at the hospital, she was garbed in a bloody white coat and armed with a chainsaw. Didn't seem like the right time to ask, "Excuse me, are you a doctor?" The first time I met her, she was like someone from an action movie, punching and shooting at my sister with dual pistols.

.....I have to say though that it's ironic how humans are the strongest in the end. However many abnormal crimes the demon possessed may cause, if the cops seriously arm themselves, it's not a mess that can't be suppressed.

".....Mrm, there's also the possibility of *Mato*-san being a superhero. Still, this is pretty cautious for her. Normally, she'd only use her own guns."

"This possession is just that terminal, I suppose. For a 'fake demon' possession, this one's not so shabby. I hate to admit it, but even a real demon can't alter a human this much. Because it's the turn of the century, perhaps. At this rate, fantasy might really lose to reality."

Kaie happily laughs without bothering to hide his black-bladed murderous intent..... Oh, wonderful. Not only *Mato*-san, but now his switch is on. Karyou *Kaie* has a fixation on real and fake, and probably, he's someone that can't tolerate fakes. To this boy whose arms and legs are artificial, fake refers to a sickness in reality, and real are the demons of fantasy.

.....I dwell back on a useless memory. Reality and fantasy. On the night that I first attached his arm, he told me the difference between the two.



Demon possession is a disease.

Its origin is unknown. It is impossible to cure. It could only be thought of as the work of the devil, maddening the mind and altering the body. However, the mechanism behind it, and only the mechanism, had been understood *since the beginning*.

In the human body, there are proteins called receptors. These receptors supposedly absorb ligands released in the synapse gaps to create new information and emotions in the brain.

“I wonder if you’ll understand this. The human body moves by the orders of the brain, but the receptors, you see, are the functions that write the results of those actions into the brain.”

The results of all actions.

If the body is damaged, “I’m hurt,” “I’m scared,” “I hate.”

If the body receives nutritional supplementation, “I like this,” “I’m happy,” “I want more.”

Human beings are organisms that constantly create new emotions. I kind of remember *Kaie* lauding us, saying that it was natural for us to change our nature each day just by waking up.

Receptors are used in processes like cell division up to higher level systems such as vital activity and emotions. In other words, these are the keyholes to the door of development and change. Demon possessed is the general term for those people whose brain receptors have become abnormal.

“People move via feeble electricity and emotions are merely a chemical response. Now wouldn’t you think that this means that the stronger the emotions,

the stronger the electric current? Humans are seemingly digital as well as analog, no, more like, poetic. After all, deep despair and mincing lament does make lightning course through their bodies.”

If a demon is a virus, it grows on human emotions. Extreme emotions, the building up of negative emotions, are the nest that raises demons. A matured virus wrecks havoc onto the system. Fundamentally, ligands bind with receptors to send numerous kinds of information to the brain. But in those with demon possession, powerful chemical reactions force the abnormal secretion of these neurotransmitters, damaging the receptors.

This is similar to the binding of the chemical substances called agonists to receptors. Agonists stimulate the receptors, and at times, fatally, as with neurotoxins. Abnormal secretion of normally harmless neurotransmitters will turn them into agonistic poison, devastating the receptors, and warping the condition of the human body.

What radiate that poison are emotions. To quell what is damaging them, the receptors will newly regulate body functions to solve the problem. They create a function that hadn't existed before, for the sole purpose of resolving the cause which is "I'm in pain".

This is Agonist Disorder. A mental disorder caused by out of control brain cell functions and neurotransmitters.

“Even humans are a product, you know. They’ll exhibit new functions once you add new parts to them. Except---well, see here. Put wings on a lizard and it’ll be a dragon, no? Even if the form of the lizard is the same as before, by having the new part, it will be treated like a different organism.”

A severe case of demon possession alters not only the mind but the body.

There are three factors to demon possession.

The affected site that abnormally secretes the agonists.

The neo-site, the function, borne from that,

And the rampant emotions that had been the cause for the development of the affected area.

In a demon possession where these three factors have appeared, the afflicted is beyond the point of humanity. As in the cases of Kizaki and *Yukio*, these people will no longer be maintaining a human structure. It's as if it's a virus that destroys DNA. When things get that far, it doesn't seem like it has anything to do with demons.

“Yes, that’s right. Immortality, the uberman desire. This is the miracle disease that man has fantasized, a genetic virus that is like a demon trying to approach God. But Arika, you musn’t mistake the order of events. The sickness called demon possession isn’t autonomic. What raises demons are human beings. Demon possession is a secondary tumor that arises only in those with sickened hearts in a sickened environment.

And because of that, it's a disease. Not one that leads to death, but irresponsible, greedy life that leeches off of sickness. It is the cutting edge in epidemics, a symbol of the phenomenon of the corroding individual and the human condition———



“So, what are you going to do, *Arika*? *Mato*-san must have planted some dynamite under you to get you moving, no?”

“Oh, she planted something all right, a jumbo-sized one. She said she’ll let the little sister out if I keep screwing around.”

“Yikes.”

My condolences, prays *Kaie* silently. The silent prayer isn’t funny, so stop it.

“Despite that, you really aren’t enthused at all. Yesterday, your position was that it wasn’t your business, too. You’re the one that took matters into your own hands when it was with Kizaki-san.”

I don’t really understand it myself. It’s just that I had the vague feeling that this case was different from what I encountered up until now.

“Ah, I get it. So, is that it? You’re ultimately just like *Mato*-san. Since no one has been killed yet, you want to look the other way.”

The crescent-shaped mouth grins beneath the shadow of the canopy.

“What? We’re completely different. *Mato*-san’s waiting for a victim to pop up. Me? Unless somebody dies, I—”

Ah. We are the same. I really can’t criticize *Mato*-san, can I?

“No, no, wait, wait. It’s not that simple..... I mean, it’s not as if this guy is evil right? He’s not killing dogs because he hates them. He just wants the stuff inside.”

It’s the motive that’s the problem. Those with demon possession that use hatred, affection, and whatnot as catalysts will misuse their power to commit crimes while in their right mind. On the other hand, those with demon possession that originates from primal emotions will misuse their power for the sole purpose of living. It’s a crime but not one deserving punishment. No, human society won’t

function if punishment is thought about one by one.

“Oh, is that so? In other words, as long as they don’t abuse their powers, they are victims. You’re saying that there’s nothing wrong with just eating to survive. But don’t you think there’s something unusual here, *Arika*? Have you even thought about the reason why this person is eating dogs?”

“Because, he...”

The reason why he’s eating dogs. That’s a no-brainer. *Yukio* can’t get his hands on normal food. I can’t picture him entering a supermarket with that lard of a body, and he probably doesn’t even have the money to purchase them, either.

“Even when the fellow is going out of the way to enter other people’s homes for dognapping? There ought to have been something edible in the refrigerators, no? Why ignore that and eat only dogs?”

“Because...”

The problem isn’t that he can’t get normal food.

He’s no longer interested.

“Yes, that’s how it is. Typical food won’t do anymore. Most of what is available has already been eaten, and the rare cuisine happened to be dogs and cats. *Arika*, do you know any meat stores that handle dog meat?”

“No. I don’t think there’s normally any demand for controversial shit.”

“You see? If the stores don’t have it, the only option is to go out and pick it up yourself. And luckily, dogs and cats are easy to find.”

“Question. Are birds and fish not good enough?”

“It’s not quite that. Rather, there’s no point. The stores have them normally. Fish and bird meat and the like should have been eaten before the demon possession occurred.”

Ah ha. Even I eat them. The fish, I mean.

“Basically, it’s not so much that the only option on the menu is dogs, but he wanted to eat dogs?”

“Yes, yes. Definitely in the experimenting phase. Now then, this is where the problem comes in. What do you think this anorexic, compulsive overeating demon possessed will eat once canines are yesterday’s news?”

He chuckles. He insinuates that this will eventually happen, as if he was a prophet whose predictions of destruction were on the mark.

“_____”

Be it reason or instinct, the fact remains. The behavior of a human possessed by the demonic will lead to monstrous results, in the eyes of society, whether or not there is any ill intent. If the reason why he is eating dogs is only out of “interest,” it’s easy to imagine what will eventually happen. If he wants proteins, this town is overflowing with animals having a bit more bite to them. The population of Shikura City was, what was it, 150,000?

“———He’s not going to eat people, is he?”

“To *Fusou Yukio*, it’s something worth trying out.”

“Meaning that people taste better?”

“Oh?Mmmm, it’s not really a taste issue. Then again, once that happens, that’s the end, I suppose. A murder will get *Mato*-san into the game, and when that person gets serious, the fakes will be filled with bullet holes.”

I raise my heavy body. I wasn’t convinced, but I began to want to check this out while it was still day. It’ll take a little less than one hour by foot to get to the can factory. Just right for killing time.

“I’ll be out for a bit. I will be back by evening.”

“Oh, are you sure? I’ll lend you the right arm if you want.”

“No, don’t need it. She only told me to find out where he’s nesting. She didn’t

ask me to do any demon busting.”

“Well, well. You’ll do things if you’re asked, eh? In that case, why don’t I ask you to do something?”

“Go to sleep, damn punk. I don’t feel a bit of good will inside of you.”



The ocean above switches to an ashen sky.

Freed from the insane chamber, I fill my lungs with the outside air and restart myself.

Looking at the time on the cell phone, I confirmed that it was past 1pm. Which means I talked to *Kaie* for almost two hours. In addition, there’s a message about one missed call on the display. There’s a message from *Tsuranui*. Suppressing an awful premonition, I playback the message.

“Hi Sempai. This is Mihaya. Um, about that movie the other day, I found out where it was. Um, well, when I was going to my part-time job, it suddenly dawned on me, kind of?”

Uh huh. That’s pretty fast for her. Actually, she’s in a subliminal state seven days a week, so of course she’ll figure it out.

“So, so, you see. I skipped class and was waiting around and watching out for him, and then just now I saw Yukio-san. Since you were telling me not to get too involved Sempai, I just gave him food. He looks bulky and scary, but he’s kind of in pain, and oh, I can’t just leave him alone.”

Message ends. Shit. I’m really getting dizzy here. I should had said “don’t get involved at all,” not “don’t get too involved.” This came in one hour ago. Nothing afterwards. I dial *Tsuranui’s* cell phone. No answer. The hopeless tone of dialing

echoes like a refrain.

“_____”

She won't answer no matter how long I do this. I feel like I'm going to crush this phone from gripping on to it too hard. The liquid display cracked. Oh, snap. If I buy a new one, I'll have to give this to *Tsuranui*.

“Ah, she picked it up.”

From dialing-up noise to connection. I'm connected, but there's no response.

——The wordless silence is longer than the dialup.

I can hear pained breathing from the speaker.

Working my normal imaginative ability, I envision what's happening on the other end. Now, just who might be the one currently holding *Tsuranui's* cell phone?

“You're *Yukio*, aren't you?”

The voice that leaked out from me was so cold that even I felt there was something strange about it. No response from him. Just about when I was going give up...

“——SEMPAI, HEEEEELP.”

I heard the sore voice of a woman, and then the phone line was cut.

“Hey.”

I redial. Only the dialup noise reverberates. Whoever's holding *Tsuranui's* phone doesn't intend to pick up. Electric currents coursed throughout my body, and my head became pure white. A semi-conditioned reflex makes me take out my frustration on the wall of the water tank, and I turn back to the underground chamber.



“Oh, did you forget something?”

“Yeah. Let me borrow that arm.”

“You do know that I didn’t ask you to do anything?”

“I had a change of heart. There’s something bad sticking onto my eardrums.”

Kaie’s eyes glitter. It was a regressive and fearless delight, the kind that occurs when finding a long begrudged nemesis.

“How marvelous, *Arika*. People aren’t an absolute, single being like God. Simply waking up will change something hated into something loved. Humans are reborn each second.”

Enough with the praise, give me the arm.

“Here you go. Take good care of it.”

I take the black, plaster-like left arm. Next, I’ll be needing a blade. I want something on the level of a kitchen knife, but there are only fruit knives here. Damn. I’ll settle for borrowing one of these.

“Oh? Why are you bringing a knife? Did you forget that this is somebody that can melt bullets? I doubt blades will work.”

“Self-defense, just in case. All right, I’m going.”

“Okay, see you, *Arika*. It’s been a while since the last stroll. I hope he’ll have fun.”

Beneath the shadow of the canopy, a black creature laughs. Carrying hatred in my right arm, I left the chamber.



Once out on the highway, at the bus stop, I'm greeted by an unfamiliar bus. I'm angry at how well planned this was, but it's a big help so I'll use it. So, from the chartered bus, I call *Mato*-san's cell phone number.

"Hello. This is Ishizue. Yes, I'm calling up about that demon possessed, ah, *Yukio*, right? I'm going to that bastard's hideout, so it'd be terrific if you would send some men there first. It'll take me about 20 minutes to get there, but I want you guys to take the guy in ASAP. What, you can't? You need proof before you can dispatch people? I see. Never mind then."

The only one that'll go by my indefinite information is *Mato*-san. I'm grateful, but surprisingly, she's not that useful. She's an outsider, and there could be factional conflicts within the department.

"What, you'll send a nearby officer over? Ah, that's not a good idea. I guarantee you that your officer is going to be the one dying. Better that I go then. *Mato*-san, where are you now? What, you're eating ice cream at Aqua Line⁴? What the fuck, why the hell are you over there?"

It only gets worse and worse. No matter how much of a speed freak *Mato*-san is, it is going to take her an hour and a half to get from the sea to Shikura City.

"Fine, I'll go first. If something happens to me, rescue me. I will be at the Shikura manufacturing district. Yes, I'm going to send you the address by email, so please, I want you zooming out of there."

I disconnect. The arm, still resting on the floor, waits with longing for its birth.

The bus speeds out of the country landscape 30% over the legal speed limit

——Not what I wanted at all, but now I have a reason why I can't ignore

⁴ A bridge tunnel out in Tokyo Bay. MATO-san is probably at the rest area.

this. Now then, with no mercy and no excuses, shall we embark on our third demon exorcism?



The factory pleasantly greeted my second visit.

Stale air suggesting death. Fading blue pain here and there. An end-of-the-world like, abandoned, derelict building. The one thing different from yesterday is the fact that it's the day, but once inside, nothing's changed.

I enter from the back and move forward into the damp, faint darkness. It's a partial darkness shut in by the veneer boards. I won't need artificial lighting. An apartment without tenants, naked concrete without decoration. In the faint darkness, the dimly visible hall ahead looked like some cave temple.

I'm close to the end of the hall. Lured by the moist stench, I moved forward, and what was there was perfect darkness. No light seeped through because of how tightly the windows are sealed.

Normally, I am supposed to feel fear in this situation, but luckily, I lost the ability to feel threatened along with my left arm. That left arm, as of this moment, is being supplemented by the prosthetic arm.

The arm is only shaped like an arm, and is no different from a mannequin's. Having no movable parts, it's like an arm chopped off from a sculpture. It's perfect only on the outside, an imitation that can't even curve its elbow, let alone the fingers. It doesn't look at all like the animated prosthetic arm that had been attached to *Kaie*. Of course it wouldn't. The blood isn't running into it yet.

I step into the darkness without hesitation. It's dismal, but there's a chance she's still alive. Until I confirm she's still alive, I have to act swiftly, while still in

control of myself.

Ah. An electronic noise rung from my pocket. Must be from *Mato*-san. It'd be reassuring if she really did zoom out of there and arrived here, but nah, not likely.

“Hello, *Mato*-sa—“

I put the cell phone to my ear.

In that instant, something hard was forced against my neck from behind.

◇

Sparkle, sparkle, sparkle. The brain explodes like firecrackers three times. The retinas fry. The consciousness burns out. As the command system is shorted out, the body turns into a simple clump of meat.

——Split-second judgment kept my nearly unconscious consciousness linked. This is a not a good time to black out. Everything might be settled, but there would be no point for me coming here. So I manage to keep my fading consciousness from blowing out like a candle, at a level where I'm practically in la-la land, unable to tell dream from reality.

Crash, thunk.

Sound of collapsing. Electricity streamed into my neck muscles. Enough voltage to clip my consciousness, but thankfully, the amplitude's at one or two. Ten inoperative minutes of simple, nerve-paralyzed despair.

Bang, bang. Bang. Slither.

Grabbed by the ankles, I am dragged. The banging's probably because I'm being pulled up the stairs. No pain is pounding my body because I'm paralyzed. My field of vision is still branded with firecrackers. It won't be returning until the

convergence of the retinas warms up.

Bonk. Slither, slither, slith, splash, splash.

The sound of rubbing against the floor changes softly. My head rolled vertically. I'm being risen. It's a seat. I'm being seated.

Ffffwip, fwip, kreak, fwip.

I am tied by some string-like object. I am getting nothing but bad vibes here. My mind, which could be blown out at any moment, is busy incoherently imaging boneless ham.

Yeah—— it looks I've been chosen for dinner.

◇

My vision returns. The retinas which had lost their focal point slowly begin perceiving the world.

Bang.

“.....ah”

What first crossed my mind was a butcher shop. What came next was a garbage dump scattered with food remains. Then, finally, I understood that I was in the middle of enormous pile of vomit and waste. I am in a room of the conspicuously large building. It probably had been used for storage before. And even after it was abandoned, this seven by seven meter room was used for storage, just as I thought.

Gobble, gob.

Dog corpses hung on the wall. Leftovers of something thrown to the edges of the room were protruding up to the center. The air clung on to my skin like sweet honey, and it felt like I'd be cocooned by it the longer I stay here.

The windows are completely shut— no, there were no windows in the room. If the door had been closed, there would be complete darkness. An airtight space illuminated by blue and white. Procuring electricity from somewhere, countless monitors were flickering on the walls. While humming, they show the scenery of the factory area and the corridor of the first floor.

Gobblegobblegobblegobblegobble.

This is too cinematic. It's a musical trio of bone, guts, and monitors. It's a Braun tube accidentally popping out from the stomach while surgery is being performed. That kind of feeling.

The waste-filled room lightened by the blue-white light of the monitors. In the center of it, an enormous bulk of flesh was wriggling.

Making chomping noises, it was consuming a late lunch. While ripping apart a 50 kilo chunk of meat, it fed.

At a glance, it looked like a swollen tumor with appendages. It couldn't be described in terms of medium build; it was a perfect sphere. Its height was the same as mine, but because of its width, it looked incredibly big. It wore just one strip-like waist cloth. That's understandable. With that kind of body, it's questionable if it'd fit in king size.

“NO, NO, I DON'T WANT TO BECOME FATTER.....!”

connection

disconnection

J the E.

disorder



Gobblegobble.

A closer look reveals that what's hanging on the wall aren't only dogs. There was the dried meat of an animal having legs for bipedal walking and two arms. I can't determine the gender. The meat from the chest was gone and the skin of the face was torn off. What surprised me even more was that the cranium was gone. The cranium's cut cleanly open. What was inside was eaten like pudding. On the floor, there were massive amounts of empty bottles. It's vinegar. That lump of meat apparently put vinegar on it because the pudding didn't have any flavor.

**“.....IE.IWANTTODIE,IWANTTODIE,IWANTTODIE,IWANTTODIEIWAN
TTODIEIWANTTODIEIWANTTODIE.....!”**

While endlessly repeating “I want to die,” it continued to eat, forgetting about me. From the amount left, it should take about two minutes for it to finish eating. I still can't move my body, and, as a bonus, I'm tied down to this chair. I'm bound to the point of sickness that I can't move a muscle. Compared to the meat around me, I'm receiving better treatment. It must be because I'm dessert.

I don't feel any fear. I take that back; this situation does scare even me, despite how numb I am to fear. It's just that my mind is turning white from the thing that's lying by the feet of the flesh blob. Shit. I tried hard to keep myself awake, but it looks like my sanity's going to disappear first.

“Hey.”

I call out. The flesh blob slowly turns.

“HUH——THE, PRIEST.”

The flesh blob suffered just by breathing. Of course it would. The gluttonous rampage warped the workings of the stomach acid, and the food that couldn't be digested pressured the stomach, and those convulsions spread throughout the body. Its breathing stopped, the skin sweated enormously, and its body was assaulted by pain as if it were going to burst.

Whatever, I don't give a shit. First things first, show me a little bit more of that *orange thing by your feet*.

“———Hey. You, ate?”

Fireworks went off by simply speaking. I don't know whether it was from the after effects of the electric current flowing in me, or if it was the emotions sparking inside. My heart circulates blood like a raging horse. I'm high. The left arm which had only been attached to me becomes *linked* to me while I lose rational thought.

“ATE, ATE WHAT.”

“The meat, duh. You're even eating it now.”

The flesh blob resumed eating, as if it remembered something. Completely finishing the 50 kilo meal, it said...

“I DIDN'T EAT IDIDN'TEAT, BECAUSE MY STOMACH ISN'T FULL.....!”

It began flopping towards dessert.

In its hands was a small jig saw. It's pitifully small in comparison to its fat fingers, but it looks like it's good enough for opening up a defenseless person's cranium.

“I'm going to take a guess here. You ate several people with that?”

“YES I ATE. BUT I DIDN'T EAT. IF MY STOMACH WAS FULL I CAN HANDLE IT, BUT IT WON'T BECOME FULL AT ALL. HE SAID I'D BECOME NORMAL IF MY STOMACH WAS FULL. GOD SAID EVERYTHING WOULD

BE FINE IF THE DEMON WENT AWAY.”

Lines I’ve heard somewhere before, and pained breathing.

“I’M SORRY. I DON’T WANT TO EAT ANYMORE, BUT MY STOMACH IS EMPTY AND...”

What I say isn’t reaching it. The flesh blob is only repeating “I’m sorry” again and again. It’s apologizing to me, the eaten, to itself, the eater, and to society, which abhors what it’s doing, while pouring vinegar on me.

“I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY.”

Who is benefiting from that apology? It’s not me. By admitting his faults, *Fusou Yukio* is justifying himself. —I’m also a weakling, but.... This guy’s weakness has already dropped off the scale of strong and weak.

Grit. The flesh blob relentlessly holds down my head. The jig saw scrapes the side of my head. *Scrape. Scrape.* I’m paralyzed so I don’t feel pain, but the flesh to the side of my left eye is cut narrowly with each back and forth motion.

“.....!”

The lack of pain makes it scary. If there was a mirror, I might have gone nuts. *Scrape, scrape.* Maybe I just didn’t realize it, but my cranium was being cut into and it’ll only be when I lost my brain that I’ll finally realize that I’ve become brainless.

“IT’S OKAY, IT WON’T HURT. DON’T BE SCARED. I DID THIS A LOT. THE BRAIN DOESN’T FEEL PAIN, SO YOU’LL BE FINE EVEN IF I SCOOP IT WITH MY FINGERS.”

Apparently he’s going by the logic that if he eats from the head, I’ll stop feeling pain. Eaten while alive, huh? I want to pass out and be put out of this misery. But still, I’ll try begging this guy to spare me. I wouldn’t bet on it working, though.

“No, don’t. Please. I don’t want to die.”

I speak mechanically. I regretted it. The instant I said that,

“——*SEMPAI, HEEEEELP*”

The plea that was sticking on my ear drums reverberated in my cranium.

The flesh blob froze, and looking at me cautiously...

“I KNOW. EVERYONE, SAYS THE SAME THING.”

He grins. He happily laughed as if he was a little kid that found a playmate.

“.....What did you say?”

**“EVERYONE, SAYS THAT BEFORE THEY’RE EATEN. IT’S, VERY SAD.
THEY CRY AND BEG ME TO STOP.”**

Scrape, scrape. The saw doesn’t stop. The blood pouring from my head is falling into my left eye. But——I don’t give a damn about that.

**“BUT I CAN’T BECAUSE I’M DIFFERENT. PEOPLE NOT CHOSEN BY
GOD WILL DIE WITHOUT BEING REBORN. I WANTED TO SAVE THEM,
BUT I COULDN’T SAVE THEM, THAT’S WHY IT’S SAD.”**

He says he’s sorry while thinking he’s superior to the people that weren’t saved. He says he’s sorry while affirming his weak self. Then he splashes vinegar on me.

**“I’M SORRY. BUT I’M SICK. IF I DON’T DO THIS I CAN’T STOP
SUFFERING. WHILE YOU STILL DON’T FEEL PAIN——I’LL EAT YOU.”**

The sawing movement accelerates. My mind became indistinct. ——The meals he had until now, I mean people that are psychologically normal, would have been driven insane at this point. However...

“——Shaddup. Don’t you dare enjoy yourself, you freak.”

This was it. The reason I came here wasn’t here anymore. It wasn’t anywhere in this room. There’s no reason for me to understand or pity this flesh blob. There is no longer even an excuse to hold back the hound of the left arm.

“What the hell is this ‘I was chosen by God’ bullshit? Don’t shove the responsibility somewhere else. You weren’t chosen, you’re just moving forward by your own will. You’re so unbearably weak you ran away into demon possession.”

“WHAT.....?”

Some time before, somewhere, I hurled words that were the polar opposite.

You’re sick, so go to a hospital. A priest can’t fix you. Sorry, the one who didn’t know better was me. Like he could actually recover from that. It’s been said again and again. That idiocy can’t be cured.

“WH...YOUR, EYES, THEIR COLOR.”

“Yeah. You see, a bit before this, I met a guy with demon possession just like you. Ah shit. You made me remember him. What the hell is this nonsense about ‘unconscious hell’? That bastard. I’ve had it with this crap about making excuses for your own weaknesses while still using it as a damn shield.

The supernatural possess only the rotten breeding ground. The idea of becoming non-human because of demon possession is nonsense. It’s because they had been weak, that they had holes, that they’d been damaged in the first place, that the demons move in. There’s no one but themselves to hold accountable.

“——Hey, fatso. You didn’t become possessed because you were emotionally weak. You ended up this way only because, from your default specs, the existence of *Fusou Yukio* was weak. This is what you get from not knowing your place in the world. You, somebody that isn’t blessed, that isn’t gifted, went around thinking you were chosen. You wanted to be reborn.”

“WH—WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE.....! YOU CAN’T UNDERSTAND HOW I FEEL! I ONLY WANTED TO STOP SUFFERING, I ONLY WANTED TO START OVER AS A STRONG PERSON BECAUSE I HAD ALWAYS BEEN WEAK.....! WHAT IS WRONG WITH THAT.....!”

“Sorry. People aren’t equal, that’s why we’re equal. You get me? What’s decided is what’s at the top and bottom and not the average. Don’t think that the balance is a scale, weakling. First off—even if a weakling at the bottom of the rung aims high, it’s going to cause trouble to the people around him.”

“I’M NOT WEAK.....! I’M NOT WEAK, I’M STRONG, I’M REALLY STRONG. GOD GAVE ME POWER, I’VE BECOME STRONG.....!”

“That’s not possible. People’s performance has been determined since the moment they were born. There ain’t anybody that moved up from weak to strong. What, what’s that? You say there’s people that managed to get by with blood-oozing effort and determination? That’s because that’s their form of strength. Don’t get the attributes mixed up, pig. You of all people should have learned your lesson, right? That people aren’t able to go back and forth that easily.”

“DO—DON, DO.....!”

Yes, a weakling is going to be a weakling for the rest of his life.

That’s why, for the people who realized they’ll be like this for the rest of their lives, the least they can do is not wish that they want to be saved. That should have been the best pride a weakling could muster. The weak will live, in their own weak way, taking pride in their weakness. Being the same weakling. I couldn’t find any worth in someone that tossed that aside.

“My home is humble, but dear to me, you get. In other words, to feel envy for

others is to scorn yourself. You're non-human scum, even worse than a weakling, that easily sold your own soul to the devil because your price tag was low. Look at the dump around you. This is your last stop. Somebody that's thrown out their humanity once, you know, is not going to find human salvation."

".....UP.....SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP.....! YOU'RE A DOG! YOU'RE NOT A PERSON, YOU'RE NOISY MEAT LIKE A DOG! DON'T LOOK AT ME! DON'T LOOK AT ME AS IF YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME!"

He becomes excited. The saw is flung away.

The man eater grabs my head with its glove-like hand.

**"I'M ONLY LOOKING FOR FOOD, I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG.....!
I'M ONLY LOOKING FOR FOOD SO THE PAIN WILL GO AWAY. WHY ARE
YOU BEING SO MEAN.....!"**

The veins of his swelling fat arm bulge. *Fusou Yukio*, like he had done with the dogs he has killed up until now, tried to crush my head, then...

"——Because you are the fuck. That ^{killed} ^{one of my own} broke my rule."

Taken by surprise. His chest was crunched by a thing having the same shape as the meat he had killed.



It hits the rotting flesh bulb.

The biting jaw. My left arm, which sprung up against my will, chewed the rope, then ruthlessly rammed the flesh blob. A bullet burst, with a 500 meters to several second velocity, unleashed point-blank. The 200 kilogram lump of flesh was blown away, amusingly, all the way to the wall.

“——, hah.”

Laughter erupts from my entrails. Emotions originate not from the brain but from the heart. After all, my brain's still paralyzed from the electric currents and there's no way for it to work properly. Two minutes, 30 seconds until the brain recovers. My limbs still won't move. But as long as I'm alive, the body is still working. I don't give a shit about the brain. The ligands skewer the receptors in the synapses. At a transmission speed so fast that it's as if it's the one thing in the world surpassing light. Blood rides the capillary highway at 300 kilometers per hour.

“Haha, hahaha, this fucking hurts, ow, ow, ow, ow, this really fucking hurts!”

From the gushing endorphin, cells ignite, nerves writhe, and sensations go berserk. Just as this happened, a guillotine went chop and dropped on my arm. The surface of the left arm which hadn't hurt in the slightest since I lost it was joined together with the “pain” that had been accumulated for two years.

“Haha, hahahahahahahahaha!”

It connects. The severed section fuses, becoming one with the black arm. The bursting blood pours inside the arm like a tsunami. It becomes a rapidly growing bulb. The flow of blood becomes nerves and hold me and the arm together. It's alive. It's alive. It's alive. The mannequin arm is now twitching as if breathing. The lost left arm regains its form and is reborn. Good. Absolutely nothing matters anymore, and yeah, I knew it, the real deal is fucking great! I'm alive, I'm really fucking alive!

“O-KAY. Why don't we finish this up in a jiff, shall we?! Now then, if you have anything to confess, now's the time to be doing it! Spill out all of your grievances and frustrations! Because if you don't, you'll be going to hell, and I'm the one that's going to be bothered if you come knocking!”

I cackle. Crap, this is way too fun. I can't even get up from this chair, but you know, this is really fun?

“A——HA...HA, HA?SO. YOU'RE ALSO, DEMON POSSESSED.”

The flesh blob ponderously rises. Blood is pouring out from the swollen, ripped chest. The bite wound, which was like a diagonal slash made by a katana, was quite remarkable for my bratty left hand.

But. At the same time. The part of my left arm past the elbow was gone.

“BUT, IT'S A WEAK AND SMALL DEMON. IT'S NOT SCARY AT ALL.”

An abnormal smell filled the room. The punching must have excited him, as the flesh blob was sweating all over. That's the stomach acid, huh? He's completely coated with it, so if I'm hit, or I hit him, the one's that going to be melted is me. What's going on with that body?

“BUT, I'M GLAD. MY DEMON IS STRONGER. I'M BETTER THAN YOU.”

He approaches me slowly. I still can't move up from the chair. He is aware of that.

“I'M REALLY HAPPY. BECAUSE—I HAVEN'T EATEN A DEMON POSSESSED YET.”

The flesh blob—*Yukio*, as if remembering something, took out a bottle of vinegar, and was coming to me. He's forgotten about his chest. Wow. That blob really has nothing in his mind except eating!

“YOU SAID SOMETHING BEFORE. THE ONE WHO SHOULD CONFESS ISN'T ME. WE'RE BOTH POSSESSED—I WILL SAVE YOU.”

His gluttoned cheeks melt. Filling stomach acid in the palm of his hands, *Yukio* laughed.

Still, this guy just doesn't learn.

His stomach acid covered arm extends.

His stomach acid melting arm rises.

“EH.....?”

The possessing demon doesn't move when there is sanity and consciousness. For just a few seconds, I force myself to lose the consciousness I worked so hard to maintain. —Now then, Hatred (tentative name)-chan. I kept you waiting. It's time for dinner.



Black out for one instant.

Roaring, the black arm exploded. It scatters on the flesh blob before me as solid matter, rains on it as liquid, and shrouds it as gas.

“E——IE, U, A.....!!!?”

As if on fire, the silhouette of the black dog writhes. It's grotesque howling, incomprehensible to the human ear, shatters the brain instead of the eardrums. All of Ishizue Arika is taken over in an instant by the left arm. It was like the night that he had lost it. The illusion of all the sensations in his bodies dying and he himself being concentrated in the left arm.

“AH.....IT HURTS, IT HURTSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS.....!!!?”

He shouts. When I open my eyelids to a voice that was neither screaming nor roaring, I saw the familiar sight of feeding.

This is the same situation as five minutes ago. What's changed is that the eater and the eaten are different.

“AAAAA.....!!! WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS.....!!!?”

He was being eaten from the feet. No. He was being gulped. The large, one meter black dog pins the flesh blob. The black dog was as thin as seaweed. It sticks itself around the flesh blob, and sounds of grinding come from the parts it's attached to.

“WHY.....!? IT HURTS, IT HURTS, IT HURTS.....! IT'S EATING ME, I'M BEING EATEN.....!”

He's being thinned from the ends of his limbs. The blind dog sniffs the smell of its prey. The flesh blob is completely helpless and sweats tremendously. Under normal circumstances, just its sweat should melt whatever touches it. But——

“WHY! YOU WERE JUST MY FOOD.....!”

How does one kill something that had been formless from the start?

Resistance is useless.

Even if he tries to dissolve it by stomach acid, that thing had already been dissolving. Even if he tries to destroy it by force, that thing had already been crumbling.

In the end, the likes of a demon that can't manifest itself without the form of a man is no better than a somewhat odd-looking human silhouette.

It's because people title these things as “demons” so easily that the definition has been twisted.

It has been said before. That if God is the embodiment of perfection, omnipotence and omniscience, then demons are the phenomenon of absurdity, human knowledge and powerlessness.

“WHY, WHYWHYWHYWHY.....!? THIS IS DIFFERENT, WHY ARE WE TOTALLY DIFFERENT EVEN THOUGH WE'RE BOTH DEMON

POSSESSED.....!"

"Don't lower me to your level. What you have is a disease. And me..."

The demon in the underground chamber speaks.

"An imaginary sensation will accept the same imaginary beasts. How marvelous, Ishizue Arika. That left arm of yours, is the ideal demon—"

"I'm apparently, a real demon controller."

The blind black dog. The imaginary formlessness eating the demon possessed, extending from my left arm. Almost all of *Yukio* has been bitten, but the reality is that the black dog isn't eating flesh. The formless can't kill the formed.

However, the story's different if he's swallowed whole. If the "existent" areas are completely smothered by "nothingness," his position will be the same as "nothing." I am reminded of the cat in quantum theory. *Fusou Yukio*, 90% of whose body has been consumed, is dead without mistake, but as long as 10% still "exists," he should be alive. Or something. In any case, that 10%'s going to be gone in just a matter of time, but...

"NO, HELP, HELP, GOD HELP.....! IT HURTS, WHY DOES THIS HURT SO MUCH, WHY DOES THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN TO ME, ITS NOT MY FAULT, I'M NOT SICK, THIS POSSESSION ISN'T MY FAULT, GOD, I'D BEEN ONLY CHOSEN BY GOD.....!"

Aaah—I've got the nagging feeling that I've heard gibberish like this death scream before in the day.

"My memory's not working right, but, did I meet you before?"

“YES, YES.....! A LONG TIME AGO, A LONG TIME AGO! YOU KEPT COMING TO SEE ME.....!”

Something during the day, huh? Sorry, I’m not going to remember that.

I pool power into my right hand. I’m able to move.

“Uh huh. I’m obliged to provide an answer, I guess.”

The knife is——perfect. I didn’t drop it.

“We can’t do anything about it, but your feelings aren’t going to reach him. Demons and God are hopelessly different. Demons are powerless so they deal with humans, but God doesn’t give a rat’s ass about us. He doesn’t care about faith, and he has no interest in how we indulge ourselves or how we suffer. Of course he wouldn’t; *he’s sufficient all by his lonesome*. That’s what it means to be all-knowing and all-powerful. God won’t save you. Since way back, there’s only been one thing that God’s been saying.”

Yukio, colored in black up to the tip of his nose, looks at me pleadingly.

Gripping the knife, I say my final sentence.

“In other words——‘*You’re pests, so don’t bother me.*’”

“——, a——”

The eyes buried in the meat, look at me in shock.

Before the jaw of the black dog covers the last 10%, I numbly forced down the knife.



Cleaving the meat with one swing, I put away the knife. The room became

quiet. The flesh blob doesn't budge an inch and the blind black dog sniffs around, searching for food. Because it lost its vision, it's looking for its favorite food with its scent sensation. Since there was a chance that it might devour awful-tasting meat, I took out the affected site from the flesh blob using the left arm to give it to the black dog.

"Ow..... Have to be left only with the arm-cutting feeling, eh?I still can't get used to this at all."

At the last moment, I had cut off the left arm. The merged prosthetic arm wouldn't come off me unless I separated it with a bladed object. On the other hand, as long as it's separated, the formlessness will return to its original form.The fact that *Fusou Yukio's* body still exists means that it didn't completely eat him.

As the black dog is absorbed in its supper, I also have something to look for. Using the light of the monitor, I looked around the room, but there was nobody alive other than us.

I pick up the cell phone that had been by the flesh blob's feet. It was a fluorescent orange that stood out even in the thin darkness. It was the one that belonged to her.

"Let's get out of here. You're finished, right?"

It doesn't respond. When I turn my head around, the black dog was gone, and the severed prosthetic arm rolled on the floor. Without reattaching it, I carry it with my right arm.

Three hours until the sun falls. Three hours to go, or only three hours left, huh? It's an honestly dubious waiting time for treasuring and discarding memories.

When I came to, the sun had long fallen. I don't know why, but I'm feeling hopelessly depressed. The time is past 8pm. On top of the table is *Kaie's* black arm. Working through a migraine, I check my memos. I was hoping for a "*nothing big*" scribble, but there hadn't even been a page for today.

"?"

From there, seven pages worth of paper was ripped from the memo pad. I twist my head in wonder, but I don't recall what happened, and more importantly, I'm very hungry. It must be because I haven't eaten anything since the morning. If I assume that the only normal meal I had was yesterday's club sandwich, that means I haven't consumed one full day's worth of nutrition. Not good, not good. Whatever reasons there are, we humans will die if we don't eat.

Wearing the same clothing that I had on since I woke up from my nap, I go to the usual pub. Nebula's crowded to the point of annoyance during dinner time. I shouldn't have come. I turn away to go somewhere else tonight. Except. In the middle of that chaos, was one idiot that was energetically waving her hand.

"Ah, Sempai! Yoo-hoo, over here, over here!"

Oh well. At this point, it's a pain in the ass to change restaurants. I suddenly felt brightened up, so I joined her.

"Sempai, you're laaate! Were you at *Kaie*-san's place agaaain?"

Tsuranui pouts as she puffs up her cheeks. She's saying the same exact thing as last night, but there's absolutely no way that we had a dinner arrangement.

"...? Sempai, why are you staring at my face? Please stop, I'm not wearing makeup today."

“Nah, it just felt like the thing to do. Better question. Why are you alive?”

“What? Why did I die?”

Little bit of silence. We look at each other as if it was it we were a couple having an awkward marriage interview.

“Sorry. I don’t know either. Well, you’re alive, so that’s good enough.”

I order a club sandwich and a cup of water. The strange discord was completely gone and I talk with *Tsuranui* about the usual banter.

“Oh, I forgot! Look, look, Sempai. My new cell phone. This time I went with the concept of vivid tropicality. It’s cute, don’t you think? Like a chameleon.”

Amazing. Didn’t we have the same conversation yesterday?

“Okay, I’ll call you so please register my number—oh? Sempai, did you leave your phone at home?”

“...? No, I should have it with me.”

I put my hand in my pocket. The cell phone I pulled out was orange.

“Oh, that’s my phone! Why are you carrying that, Sempai!?”

“That must be because I picked it up.”

There’s no reason other than that. Since I don’t remember how I picked it up, it was useless trying to guess why.

“Ah. Did you go to the factory after you heard my message? Did you find *Yukio*-san? It’s embarrassing, but I became scared halfway and ran off.”

The migraine again. While I didn’t remember what happened, it felt like dots connected. But I’ll stop digging any further. The pages from the pad were torn out. Three hours ago, I judged that was the right thing to do.

“Huh, Sempai? Your face is looking kind of uncomfortable.”

“I don’t know. People don’t know how they look without mirrors, you know. Anyway, this cell phone.”

I return it, or was about to, but I changed my mind. *Tsuranui* has a new one, and for some reason I lost mine.

“Can I have it? It looks like I lost mine.”

Tsuranui's eyes open wide.

So. From whatever chemical reaction that went off in her brain, her cheeks turn red and she begins tracing a spiral with one hand.

“Oh my, are you that interested in my personal info, Sempai? Eheheh, but, well, since it is you, Sempai, I guess it's okay to show you.”

“Nope, I just reformatted it.”

“Gah, that's fast! Aw, please show some interest!”

She bangs the table. Because of how noisy she is, the eyes of the people around are gathering on us. But, maybe I've been affected by a chemical reaction too, so I'll let her do what she wants tonight.

“Right, so this is mine. I'll pay you later.”

“O-kay. Take good care of it.”

To replace what I lost, I stuff away something that had been lost in my pocket. The unknown weight on my chest lightened by that one cell phone.

———This time, I'll do my best at not losing it.

The junky ones are the ones where the emotional attachment builds up. Plus, now that I'm looking at it closer, this bright color, which somebody can easily find, isn't so bad, either.

3/junk the eater.



That day, was the rare one where I worked at night.

I received a call from *Kaie* about him being busy with some investigation. He oh-so-pleasantly said that I didn't have to come during the day, but to show my face at night. "When the devil did I become your servant," I burned in defiance, but since I am his servant however you look at it, I quietly showed my face.

"And that's the details behind the October 13th demon exorcism of *Fusou Yukio*..... *Arika*, are you listening?"

Does he really have nothing better to do? He had me come here to make me listen to the facts about something I did days ago.

I had heard that the rumored dog killer was taken in, but apparently the one who took him down was me.

Of course, I don't remember this at all. The only stuff I remember about that guy is from the stupid conversation I had with *Tsuranui* and the movie she showed me.

"*Arika*, don't you remember? I can't believe that you don't know anything at all. What happened to your memos and cell phone?"

"Ah, it's completely gone. It seems like I got rid of it without leaving behind a recording medium. So nope, no matter how much you want me to, you can't get

anything off from me.”

“Yipes, you’re the careful one. I can’t ask you, then. Shucks, I really wanted to know how much food and what kind of demon possessed *Fusou Yukio*. Oh, and the reason as to why you didn’t kill anyone this time again.”

Kaie grins, shaking his long hair. —I don’t like those eyes.

It feels as if the blacks of his lightly-pigmented eyes see through a deep layer of me that even I’m not aware of.

“Not a big deal. The fact the other guy isn’t dead is just a matter of the guy not being so tough that I had to kill him. They’re sick people. I’ve got to be gentle.”

“Is that so? So, back over there, you were able to afford to do that. But, *Arika*. That arm is made from my emotions, remember? If you moved that left arm, we have to take it to mean that the matching emotion was put to action. You should have certainly borne ‘hatred’ for *Fusou Yukio*.”

Karyou *Kaie*’s arms and legs. Four black, plaster-like artificial appendages. Despite the fact that I’ve been with him up to this point, I don’t know what they are.

But, he tells me that they’re things that had been formed originally from human emotions. Four limbs made to give Karyou *Kaie* a “human form.”

By losing my left arm, I lost the emotion of feeling “threatened.” An originally complete human body became damaged and an emotion was lost. Then, let’s say hypothetically—hypothetically, that somebody was born in a form without inherent tactile perception. Couldn’t it be possible for that someone to wear a “human form” by paying with those emotions?

For example. Something like, discarding the four emotions making up the foundation of a human being to give each corresponding tactile perception a form—

“It’s really too bad. I was hoping that this would be the time you finally did it, but you ended up saving somebody again. Argh, I am starving you knooow. Perhaps I should go on a rampage, maybeee.”

Tonight, *Kaie’s* wearing both legs and arms. Only me and *Kaie* are inside. Neither the fish swimming in the sky nor the dog lying in the shadows are here.

“.....Hmph. Do whatever the hell you want. And I’ll have you damn know that it wasn’t me saving anybody. I don’t remember what happened, but the reason why I didn’t kill him is for my own sake. I don’t have any other reason to spare him.”

I infer what happened at the past that was no longer my own.

I shouldn’t have felt pity for him. For my own sake, I just didn’t kill him. It’s a zero or one deal. No matter how inhuman he was or how much I didn’t care about him, I didn’t want to damage my “conscience.”

People, if they want to live normally until they die, should keep their sense of guilt to a low. I let the guy go, not because I wanted to spare his life, but because I simply wanted to protect my stability.

“Oooh, I see. You didn’t want to make *Fusou Yukio* atone; you prioritized the life of Ishizue *Arika*, eh? Oh, I really can’t complain anymore after hearing something so adorable.”

Whatever, whatever. This is the number one line that I don’t want to hear from a guy, even worse, a kid younger than me.

“Oh well, then. I suppose I’ll pin my hopes on next time. That said, I’m finished with *Mato-san’s* documents. No point in teasing you any more about this if *Fusou Yukio* is just another demon possessed to you. *Arika*, give this back to *Mato-san*.”

Here you go, he says, as he holds out the envelope.

“To *Mato*-san? Why—”

“Because you’re the one that brought them to me.Oh right. You’ve forgotten that, too. It had been in the day, yep. Then you wouldn’t remember why *Fusou Yukio* ended up that way. An anorexia-caused case... it sure was one deserving of pity.”

“Anorexia.....?”

The dog killer became like that because of anorexia?That’s strange. Wasn’t he unusually fat from the movie *Tsuranui* showed me?

“Oh, I thought you weren’t interested?”

“No, but there’s something bothering me. Let me see that envelope.”

I look over the documents that *Mato*-san supposedly lent out to us.It’s true. It’s presumed that anorexia was the cause. But, if that’s true, doesn’t that contradict the 60 kilogram per day consumption rate? If anorexia’s the cause of the demon possession, he should have become a demon possessed that couldn’t take in food.

“*Kaie*. What is this? How did he turn out like that from anorexia?”

“Why, that’s—— Oh, I get it. *Arika*, you’re getting tripped up over something fundamental. You’re thinking like this, no? *Fusou Yukio*’s diagnosis is wrong. This person is obviously someone possessed by “eating.” Therefore, the cause should be obsessive compulsive overeating. No?”

“Yeah. Abnormal consumption of foods. It can’t be anything other than that.”

“I told you, that’s not it. Obsessive compulsive overeating and anorexia. They’re the exact opposite conditions, but they come from the same psychological factor. You see, *Arika*. They’re both psychological illnesses, prevalent in women, that both originate from the fear of becoming fat.”

Kaie speaks. He says that they’re both sicknesses in which the body can no

longer be controlled by emotions. It's an issue of adding or subtracting, and both anorexia and compulsive overeating are means of weight control that went off course.

Anorexia and bulimia are conditions where fear is learned in eating itself, and the stomach becomes unable to accept food.

Compulsive overeating, however, is what happens when they "couldn't" become thinner, out-of-control stress that gets taken out on food. People who become fatter no matter how hard they try will have this.

Just as anorexics don't see anything wrong with their thin and weakly bodies, the compulsive overeaters, while thinking that they don't want to see their fattened bodies, that they want to die, will continue eating food from that stress.

That's why these illnesses, psychological structures akin to self-destruction, are not contradictory to each other. These are feelings that any human will have. Fear of becoming ugly can't be ignored no matter who it is.

"———Okay, I get it. But, why did they become completely opposite of each other? Even if the source is the same, the methods are completely different. *Fusou Yukio* was anorexic. Why didn't the possessing demon not turn into something that hated eating?"

"Yes, that's the interesting part of this case. *Fusou Yukio* had been anorexic for some time. What do you think, in that case, is the emotion that became the strongest during that long struggle?"

".....Wouldn't it be the fear of becoming fat?"

"Nope, something more simple and fundamental as an organism. You don't know? *Fusou Yukio* hadn't had a satisfactory meal for years, no? If it were you *Arika*, what do you think would bother you?"

“——Starvation. Oh, that’s it. In other words, he...”

“Yes, *Fusou Yukio* was simply starving. The sickness reacted to that emotion and created a ‘gluttonous’ demon possession.”

That’s why he was binge eating. While knowing he’d become fatter the more he ate, *Fusou Yukio*, pushed by starvation, could only continue to gorge food——

“.....Wait. Then, why eat junk like dogs? What’s the connection to starvation? If his stomach’s empty, normal food should have been fine, and don’t tell me that dogs and cats tasted better.”

“Oh, that? I’m saying it’s not about the flavor. The cause was starvation, but *Fusou Yukio’s* objective was different. I told you, yes? That anorexia and compulsive overeating both have the same cause.”

The cause is the same.....? *Kaie* just said it, but the cause for anorexia and compulsive overeating is——

“——Oh.You’ve got to be kidding me. You mean *Yukio’s* been eating dogs and people because——”

“Bingo, *Arika Yukio*, who was afflicted by demon possession because of an empty stomach, could only continue to look for food. An anorexic controlled by hunger. To *Yukio*, who didn’t want to become fat, this was hell. And at the end of that, *Yukio* was taken hold of by a basic delusion that anyone would fall for. That is, if you couldn’t stop, then you find food that you wouldn’t get fat from no matter how much of it you eat.”

It had nothing to do with the taste. More like, no matter how bad it was, to *Yukio*, the ultimate food was the one that couldn’t make him fat. But there’s no such thing as that. At the very least, in the sphere of life that *Fusou Yukio* was in,

it didn't exist.

Because of that, he continued to look for salvation, for food he hadn't eaten yet.

"Are you satisfied? Still, it's not such a rare diet nowadays. Keep your calories down and cool down on the alcohol and late nighters. It can happen to you, too, *Arika*. Nobody wants to be burdened by excess weight. It's important to have a diet that will still allow you to control your body."



Returning the documents to the envelope, I release a large sigh.

Honestly, that wasn't pleasant at all. I don't know who he was, but to go nuts because of that?

"Thanks. Since all my questions are answered, I'm done here."

"What, already? But you just got here, and I don't mind if you hang around longer. Oh, how about staying over for the night? Lately we've only been talking during the day, so why not have the occasional memory-lasting conversation?"

"No way. There's no alcohol here, it's dark, and I already got my money. I'll be partying in a normal restaurant on my payment days."

Plus, I'm not in the mood, and I don't have the stamina to talk to a fully-armed and legged *Kaie*.

"I'm going. If you want to talk about demon possession so much, go grab *Matō*-san. You hawks can get roused up over this together. Oh, and stop getting a powerless little civilian like myself mixed up into this nonsense."

"What are you talking about? You're just like them. Do you really not realize it yet? To the people around you, you are the prime example of a demon

possessed.”

“Goddamn. It’s YOUR left arm isn’t it? I’m only using it. It’s an attachment. I’m not possessed.”

“Nuh uh. What I mean is your condition. You lose everything that happened in the day once it becomes night. You’re unbearable to look at because you’re so pitiful. You’re dying every night, aren’t you?”

“Ah, you meant that. You’re as persistent as everybody else, huh.”

I rise from the sofa and put the envelope between my armpit.

Tonight, the moon is bright. Because the water of the tank has high transparency, the moonlight is reaching me while shimmering in the water.

———Now then. It’s not important, but I got a bad habit I can’t help avoid. I can safely say it’s a bad habit since, while knowing about it myself, I can’t do anything about it.

“Look, why am I pitiful? Depending how you look at it, it isn’t that bad, right? I can completely forget about yesterday’s tab after all.”

Yeah, yeah. Like *Kaie* said. I forget what happens in the day. I completely lose my memory of what happens from the day to the evening, up until night falls.

I can remember in succession what happened at night, but only the events during the day are reset when night comes. Day-to-day memory loss. That’s the current predicament of Ishizue Arika. The after effect of having my left arm eaten by a demon possessed two years ago. According to *Mato*-san, I’m a demon possessed that’s harmless.

The fortunate thing amidst this misfortune is that my personality

development had already been completed long ago. I'm not a kid that can't make judgments of right and wrong, and just losing my day memory at night isn't that big a deal. Basically, I'm getting by, by not making any promises for the following day and leaving all decisions to the night.

That's why I'm keeping my memos to a minimum. Two years worth of memos neverending *nothing bigs*. I don't need to write down all the fine little details. No matter what happens in the day, there's no problem. Since, no matter what happens, there's nothing to leave behind.

"My creed is that I want to live the easy life. Having a body that forgets the stupid stuff suits me fine. It's not your place to be telling me anything."

I turn my back to the light of the moon. It's late. Before the calendar changes, I have to return to the surface quickly.

"I see. That would thin out the melancholy. To have no memory is to have no worries. But, *Arika*? Do you realize that living easily and enjoying life are different?"

Kaie tells me with a voice that would roll a bell. His crystal eyes are tinged in delight and shine like gold.

"You said that your creed is that 'you want to live the easy life,' not 'live the easy life,' yes? What you have isn't a creed, it's a wish. You haven't come to terms with yourself as much as you're pretending to be. With the way you are, you really will be possessed."

"That's stupid. I'm already possessed. Right, oh yeah, that's it. You say this a lot. What's different between a real and fake demon. About that. I found an easier way of telling them apart."

"Oh, and...?"

"The fakes leech off of humans. But the real ones don't. It's been said before,

right? Demons appear in exchange for a *human soul*. In other words, their motto is give and take.”

The presence of grinning in the blue white darkness. That damn punk, he immediately figured out what I wanted to say.

I want his left arm. He wants my left arm. Look at that. Demons, huh? I already made a contract with one a long time ago.

“Later. I’ll come tomorrow.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow, in the day.”

I leave the chamber without turning back.

Once at the surface, the surroundings were completely dark. To make matter worse, the bottom of the ocean was brighter.

Leaving the forest, I walk in the country landscape.

The stars are high, the night is long. People can get by life even with only half a day. And at the moment, I do have one arm and that’s just about right for a broken person.

Heading to town, I pull out an orange cell phone and place a call to the appropriate acquaintance.

“Ah, hello? HARO, *Tsuranui*. You have time?”

Now. Since I’ve got money, why don’t I indulge myself after a days-long absence of food.

/Anorexia bulimia – End



I leave the abandoned building. Probably because breathing the natural air made me relax, I naturally lowered my waist and took a break. Taking out my phone, I replayed my messages one more time.

“Hi Sempai. This is Mihaya. —”

Delete.

“And then just now I saw Yukio-san.”

Delete.

“Um, about that movie the other day, I found out where it was. Um, well, when I was going to my part-time job, it suddenly dawned on me, kind of?”

“But he’s kind of in pain, and, oh, I can’t just leave him alone.”

Delete.

Then, after coming this far, I realized that I didn’t have to go through the call history one by one, and the whole process felt idiotic.

“Take that.”

I smashed the phone against the wall and kicked it again and again. That’s done. Once the sun sets, that’s it. But, it’s not a good idea to leave behind any fuzzy records. If it’s a memory that won’t return, I have to destroy the other memories.

But, with really great momentum, a red car came dashing from the factory door. It’s *Mato*-san’s Volvo. Wow. She actually did zip out of there and get here in no more than an hour.

“Shozai.”

She runs from the car. I’m a little happy since she seems to be somewhat worried. Despite how cruel I might be or how cold the other person is, it feels nice to be concerned for.

“Howdy. You were fast.”

“It looks like I arrived late. You look like a mess, Shozai. And, what is this? This smell. What were you, covered in vinegar?”

That’s the truth actually. But I’m dealing with *Mato*-san, the junk food lover. If I give her a straight answer, she might eat me head first, so I’ll stay quiet.

“——So, the demon possessed is...?”

She probably means if he’s alive, not where he is.

“Lying flat down in the storage room on the third floor. By the way, *Mato*-san, did you eat lunch?”

“Oatmeal and two rib sandwiches. Why?”

“No reason. Just a little sinister question of mine. That’s it for me. Before the police get here, I’ll leave.”

“Yeah, good idea. ——Wait, Shozai. Do you recognize this girl?”

The picture she showed me was a 14, 15 year old girl. The girl, wearing a student uniform all too familiar, was as slim as a dried up tree.

“Hah. Who is this?”

“The demon possessed in this case. Before lunch, I borrowed this from her parents after seeing you.”

“What? That was, a girl?”

“A girl. Fusou Yukio 扶桑 雪緒. She was in the same high school as you. You didn’t know?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“I see. I didn’t think there would be that many coincidences. Good work. Go back home. Depending on the situation, I’ll ask you what happened later.”

Mato-san enters the building after contacting somebody.

Holding the prosthetic arm in one hand, I depart from the factory. But. So that’s it. That was a girl.

If I think about this too deeply, I’ll reach a conclusion I don’t want to consider, so I lock away my memory. Tearing seven pages, I leave no trace of it at all. Except, the words stuck in my eardrums wouldn’t stop ringing.

Three hours until the sun falls. Three more hours, or only three hours remaining, huh?

I remember the conversation we briefly had.

Because I was the same weakling as her, I might have been able to understand her a little better than anyone else.

But there was a pitfall in that. The only ones that can understand weaklings are weaklings. But——because weaklings are weaklings, they don’t have the luxury of being able to save others. Because we were both weak, we couldn’t reach out a hand to each other despite being able to understand the other’s pain.

“——SEMPAI, HEEEEELP.”

Know sorrow, someone had said. But even if I knew it, it didn’t mean anything if it didn’t remain in my heart. On impulse, I thought about writing this with as much detail as time would allow, but I crushed that thought because it was meaningless.

But fine. It’ll be forgotten when it turns night anyway.

/JtheE.end



2.

HandS.(R)

disconnection

decoration D isconnection
D disorder HandS

ねえ石杖さん。

仮に、神さまに形を与えたとしたら何を想像します？

僕は手です。

神さまが人間に知恵を与えたモノとするなら、

人間の手こそ神さまだと思うんです——

Written by Kinoko Nasu
Illustrated by Koyama Hirokazu
(TYPE-MOON)

Hey, Ishizue-san.
What if you could give a form to God?
What would you imagine God as?
I would imagine him as a hand.
If God is an object that gave mind to human,
then human's hand is the God himself...

... Whatever he did, nothing worked out well.

At one summer night, when he was found by a phantom under the Sun, lying on a two-tier bed, he vaguely realized: what if he wasn't just awfully mistaken until now, but also can't correct his mistakes until death?

Next morning, his uneasiness came true.

And now the kind smile of his father, without a filter, was a smile full of prudence, and gentle eyes of his mother weren't radiating love and care, but were blackened with indulgent pity. For a moment... He remembered his friend, who did one wrong step and tumbled down the stairs.

If you only look at the good side, he was a perfect child, a honor student. If you ask for people's opinion, everyone valued him. But...

Phantom from yesterday chuckles.

Know your place. Nothing will go well like clockwork.

You are a loser for eternity.

... Recovery wasn't going well.

When your way of acting lacks important, vital parts...

A car, even a very fast one, is imperfect and defective without brakes. One day it will fail to make a right turn.

When you notice disconnection, it becomes much clearer.

And here you notice that you, no, your way of acting is only calling for a general enmity. And if so...

*

Well, and he...

Whatever he did, nothing worked out well.

----- HandS.(R)

\Beginning of 2004

*

Hisaori Shinya, male, 16 years old.

He became a witness in Hisaori Makina's aggression outburst case, which happened in their house, and after the crime his mental condition became unstable, which is why his sanity was put under doubt, and he was placed in this clinic for appropriate procedures.

-- What, name?.. You ask that right in time, nothing to say. That name had a meaning, but it was long ago, and it's mostly dispersed by now. But, hm... Well, yes, since it's left in documents and examination results, then I'm surely... it's....
Hisaori Shinya.

Right after coming to clinic, Hisaori Shinya refused to cooperate, and he neither said that he wasn't involved in the crime nor that he's Hisaori Shinya.

Investigation assumed that it was an attempt to avoid being listed as involved in the crime, but later agreed with psychiatrists about necessity of clinical examination. Three doctors diagnosed a rare mental state, in which patient would be happy to admit he's Hisaori Shinya, but just can't believe it.

-- Of course, whatever happened, I am me. I just couldn't do anything. I came to senses after falling from chair, nothing changed inside of me, but... but my place in life disappeared.

In Hisaori Shinya's statement words "loss of self" and "capture" were frequently repeated. A responsible doctor noted scopophobia, an obsessive idea of being constantly observed by someone.

-- So, as I was saying - when I fell, a suspicious demon got seated in a chair. By the way, it's you who left him roam free, while it still wasn't late!

Taking in account the tragedy, consisting of two dead and one heavily wounded, and also mental state and age of Hisaori Shinya, medical commission made a decision of putting patient in a clinic.

Two weeks after the tragic events took place, Hisaori Shinya admitted his guilt and repented for his sins. In clinical record, it was noted, that due to the temporary nature of violent lunacy, there is a chance for full recovery after the

appropriate psychiatric procedures, and he may hope for indulgence of the court. Though...

-- What?.. Are you joking? I don't intend to return to my former life. Let's say, just because I was placed here, my reputation is already over. I don't have a place in life, what am I going to do there? Just fall into depression. An odd man out - that's not for me.

Hisaori Shinya admitted the fact of murdering his parents with his own hands, of his aggression to his older sister, after which...

-- That's why I want to die as soon as I can. But I just can't die yet. Terrible, yes, but that's my mission. You left me roaming free. Oh yes. Now I have to use my life to bring down that demon.

He still calls himself a victim.

Below is the protocol of events from three years ago, during which Hisaori Koji and Hisaori Kayo were killed.

*

"Hisaori-san from the third room - it's that role model one, you know? Looks like it fits. Amazing, so little, but made such a mess... And I pity him too, just came out to the street, bang - killed two people... That's an exile to a colony right away, right?"

"Half a year ago, yes. But now, you know, that 'obsessed' thing? Well, because of it, parents' death is an 'accident', well, at least they say so..."

"Really?! I heard it was a false accusation, and it sounds true - he was mumbling something crazily, but there's something... about the damage done to corpses, or something like that."

"Is that so... Well, what did it start from, anyway?"

"Huh? You don't know?"

Well, listen. Hisaori-kun has an older sister..."

Beginning of summer, 2003.

*

Clinic's lobby was concreted.

The glazed entrance, about ten meters wide, was covering a picture that was nothing else but a nightmare for a patient here, and I think that physically blocking the only entrance and exit was a very bad idea.

Not even because the patients, me included, couldn't go outside. But because such a huge medical complex doesn't have any incoming - well, coming from outside patients. Not a single one. A hospital you can't come in to - I think it can't be called hospital anymore.

Of course, that was my personal perception on it, because that was strictly a hospital. Five buildings, even though there wasn't much medical staff, not even a hundred people, made it the largest hospital of the prefecture. Actually, not a single patient knew where are we. People conventionally thought we're "somewhere in the north", but that doesn't actually matter, as you can't leave here. They say that before becoming a patient here, while possessed is still living in a society, he's sent to a laboratory. Laboratories were called "Origa", "Kinui" and so on. Of course, it's not such a happy place here, it's an unambiguous clinic, and day after day dozens of doctors are tiring themselves for the sake of curing us.

Completely white buildings without a single stain.

Tranquil alley, crystal clear chambers, huge garden surrounded by high walls, glazed from one side waiting room embraced by sunlight. Nothing to pick on, everything in order.

That's why lobby's facade was extremely out of place. Well, after all though, it was the only place in clinic where you could see gray color, and it was lobby that was, in a way, telling us our place here.

Just as I was coming back from lobby to building B, the only one with an inside garden, music filled the clinic.

Adagio by Albinoni.

At the same time some patients in the waiting room of building B limply went to their chambers.

Private time for one of the buildings was over.

When the time comes to come back to chambers, music is sounded for patients. If you hear it - come back to your chamber. It's improper to announce "Dear patients of x building, your private time is over!" - and it's no good for other patients to know who's from which building.

Looks like everyone's music is adagio today. I'm from the C building, and we had adagio by Brahms. That means that one's returning now are from either B building or A building. Patients from D can't come here, to B building, so D building is excluded.

Music is changed everyday, and if you're curious, you can find out who's from which building, but patients here don't feel like doing such nonsense. That was in a mutual assent with staff.

All patients that are allowed to leave the room are harmless like corpses, that's why in a waiting room everything's so in order that you get dizzy. On a sofa, that probably wasn't stuffed from the clinic's opening day, are some dormant sitting patients.

Bleached with an afternoon sun waiting room reminds of a church. It hurts my eyes. The sight of praying corpses under the bright sun.

-- ...

That brings me to thought about that summer day, and I join the corpse company. I fall on the sofa, unable to bear dizziness.

*

Opening of that isolation ward is a ten year old story.

Ten years after discovery of the carriers of A-syndrome - in common parlance, "possessed" - specialized health center was finally built, where the earliest, and maybe the latest diagnosis was confirmed about twenty years ago.

Symptoms of the illnesses were so surrealistic (or exceeding expectations) that medical institutions couldn't react in time.

As a result, country bought an unfinished public hospital not in the greatest area

of N prefecture, and prepared it for curing the "possessed", so it became this health center.

Later, the inhabitants of building A, after moving to clinic, got a duty and rights for special procedures.

To this clinic, the only and greatest health center in the country, all Japanese carriers were being brought.

... Though infection patterns were limited to west part of Japan, so "all Japanese" term is inaccurate.

Normally, patients diagnosed with A-syndrome received state care, after which they were brought to this clinic, and then they were allocated to one of the buildings, A to D.

Once in a clinic, patient could not leave until he was cured and wasn't allowed to meet with his family. That was necessary both to prevent leaking of distorted information to society and to protect patients' private life.

Even now, ten years after, security classification was still high, but everything noted here isn't about specific patients.

That completely isolated from outside world sterile space.

And now I think that this little world, that made you think if everything's extinct in the outside world now, was for them, carriers and patients, best possible environment.

*

-- ...ri-san? Hisaori-san, are you not feeling well?

Gentle words make my dizziness fade. Getting up from sofa that I fell onto, I answer: "I'm alright".

Doctors that were crowding the waiting room quickly and habitually test my pulse and my pupils, and note: "No abnormalities".

-- Okay. Don't overexert yourself. If you can't return to your chamber, don't be shy, shout.

As usual, showing his knightly attitude, Dr. Dolittle, also known as Dr. Kinui, left the waiting room.

"Carriers" - it doesn't mean that our illness is spread through air or some other type of contact. It isn't spread through fluids, skinship or animals. Normally, carriers don't increase number of carriers. That's the only common feature of the polymorphing A-syndrome.

As for confirmation of this theory, Dr. Dolittle fearlessly touched the patients. Of course, other doctors weren't so heartfelt, or humanitarian.

On streets, people with A-syndrome are called "possessed". A rude nickname, but in the sense that they can't be handled like normal humans, it's absolutely right. All their thinking processes become a little bit eccentric, and body grows new organs. In mild cases, physical abilities become stronger or weaker, in heavy cases they're multiplied. To put it bluntly, it's apparent.

For example, my face nerves became more sensitive than normal human's, but I didn't have any special changes.

Nevertheless, among those patients in the waiting room, there are some with sixth finger or unknown outgrowths. It's easy to see them.

Which means, we're divided to those, whose old abilities were changed, and those, whose body was changed.

The latter are frankly freaks, and they're very lucky, Dr. Kinui became like a native to them. It's like they met Buddha in hell. The nickname "Dolittle" isn't just for appearances. When you talk to him, you feel like maybe you can really get cured?..

Whatever you say, though, even if you get cured, the crimes you committed aren't going anywhere. But even just because I'm put to this clinic, my life is over.

-- ...I overdid it. I didn't have to go that far.

It's been two years since then. I blundered and was caught. Full of determination to commit a full-blown crime, I, without dirtying my hands, inflicted injury on my parents. For half a year I was spending my life with those people, for whom for the same amount of time a trap was being prepared. You can't really get out of a trap like that. Dad and mom both stepped on a mine so good, it was a pleasure to watch. But it missed a little, and as a result two dead bodies fell on the ground one next to each other.

-- ...It's a shame. Well, whatever. Screw the result, everything was perfectly prepared. But all my tricks weren't worth a broken penny when I was

accidentally spotted as possessed and caught.

It's like karma. Order of my actions was perfect. My blunder was that I had a goal, and in the end, as a compensation for that, I became confined in this hospital center.

Though, compared to other patients, I have some hope.

Two years after, my parents' death was noted as an accident, and my innocence was, actually, proven. I didn't kill anyone yet, and I could let myself be a little optimistic.

Right now I was concerned with my full recovery and, finally, freedom from this place.

I want to come back to society. From the very beginning, I was trying hard for that. From the very beginning, it was my goal. I was delayed by that case with mother and father, but I'm going to be innocent again and recreate myself.

I repent. This time I'll live like a human, in a way not to harm anyone. For that, I first have to find a new way to exist - no other way, it seems...

-- ?..

Just when I got filled with optimism and raised my head, a weird something caught my eye. In front of the glass door, leading to the inside garden, something impossible was happening.

Dissolved in sunlight, a man with a paintbrush in front of a canvas. Around my age, but with gray hair. That gray-haired youngster, with bored look, was drawing a worthless painting.

For the first time in two years, my cheeks spread by themselves.

Youngster, sticking out his lip, was moving a paintbrush on a canvas. He was just having fun drawing, to kill time. Amazing. Why did he decide to do that?

Unable to fight my curiosity, I went up to him.

-- Sorry, you don't mind if I stick around?

-- Hm?

My tongue started to talk before awkwardness came. In this building, it's uncomfortable to talk to other patients. It's not prohibited - but you just won't

get answered. Probably that youngster was looking so carefree that this theory, absorbed by me in the past couple years, got completely forgotten.

-- Sure. But I only have one chair.

He appeared to be even more carefree than it looked like from afar. I remembered the almost forgotten, heard who knows how many years ago, art of naturally talking.

-- I'll sit on the floor. Can I watch for a bit?

-- As long as you won't be a bother. But a weird taste you have.

Gray-haired one snorted, looked at me and engulfed himself in drawing.

His glance was a bit scary. He's probably always like that, but his glance was like snake's. I have a childish face, I try to look admiringly. He looks originally, like a street bully.

Which building he's from, I wonder. I didn't see him in C. It's either B or A.

Probably, A - I can't imagine people looking this healthy in building B.

-- Mm, which building are you from?

-- From A. Sorry that I occupied the place in B. I have a scary sister there. I'm trying to flee to where I don't catch her eye.

I looked closer - he was all in moles.

I only know about that from rumors, because I'm quiet, but they say that disobedient patients are examined by some medical expert, that is like a demon from hell. Somewhy I decided that this man is his permanent client.

-- Hm? Eh, you don't have a hand?

-- Yeah, dropped it on the way here. That's why I'm now in a hospital.

-- Woah, I envy you. A normal clinical reason.

What am I saying... But that's true. The patients they're bringing here are those with weird outgrowths. And this gray-haired one - with a normal wound, normally went for treatment, a normal patient.

-- Ah, no, that's just, unthinking observation, mm...

He looked at me, amazedly.

He grinned - one that said "a", would say "b".

-- I see. Pessimist, but optimist. By the way, yes, it's logical that I came to a hospital...

His right hand with a paintbrush draws a sharp line.

For a while I'm watching his movements. He isn't drawing something in

particular. He just has nothing to do, and painter's utensils caught his eye, so he's using them. He doesn't have a motive to display, he's caught in the very process of drawing. Naturally, he doesn't care what gets drawn, his mind is in other place.

-- Hm, that hand of yours...

-- M? Which hand? One that I have? One that I don't?

-- The one you have. Your movements are very agile, they're fascinating.

He looked at me amazedly again. Maybe he's always this amusing?

-- "The one I have", amazing. Usually people ask me about how I lost my left.

-- There's no meaning to talk about what is not. I have more interest in your right one. Is it possible to be so agile at handling everything with one hand?

Gray-haired chuckled.

-- I don't have the other one, so I'm doing my best.

Movements so natural, it feels like he was born with one hand.

I wanted to talk with him again, but then heard music. Adagio by Brahms. The slow classic tune, pressuring the freedom of building C's patients.

-- Are you going to be here tomorrow too?

-- If I'll be able to move after examination. The picture's going to take a while.

Relieved, I get up. I have to say my goodbyes and go back to building C.

-- Wait. Let me write down your name.

-- Hah?

Looks like he has a horrible memory. He seems to have a habit of writing down everything new and important.

-- I'm Hisaori Shinya. And you?

-- Shinya? It doesn't fit you. Well, I'm not the one to talk...

Gray-haired writes "所在" in a corner of canvas, which means "location".

-- Weird name, right? - Gray-haired ironically, but with some pride in it, smiled, and added: - And it's read as "Arika", with that.

That's how, on the second year of my confinement, I got acquainted with Ishizue Arika.

If you think about it, from the handful of friends I have, with two I got acquainted with this clinic.

One, as you already guessed, is this gray-haired.

The other one is, afterwards drowning this clinic in blood, his sister.

Buildings, ordered from A to D, are equipped with strict exit/entry control. Patients' freedom consists of two levels, first one of them - freedom to leave their chambers. It's given to patients like me or Ishizue-san, who didn't have any cases of aggressive behavior in the past.

Directorate also decided to give freedom of taking strolls to neighboring buildings. That is the second freedom level. It was intended to allow communication between the carriers, and recovery of their social behavior. It wasn't called for. They have more than enough of themselves, they don't communicate. Me and Ishizue-san are exceptions, but Ishizue-san is an amazing guy a level above me. He can freely talk to any patient. I think that was the reason he got almost killed a couple of times, but he doesn't learn. He just doesn't have anything that resembles feeling of danger.

-- Well, what can I do? Mato-san told me to talk to other patients as much as I could.

The same old waiting room in building B. Ishizue-san said that today he's going to finally finish the painting - in a voice that felt like he absolutely hates the very thought of it.

-- You don't like to paint, Ishizue-san?

-- Well, not to say I don't like it: it's cool, but it's strange. I only started it because some doctor suggested to kill time like that. And today is the last time. After that... Yeah, wanna play catchball or something like that?

Ishizue-san, being an unexpectedly responsible guy, doesn't drop what he started halfway. Like he said himself: "If I don't finish it properly, I'd be scared for my afterlife".

-- It's nice for you, guys from A building, you get to borrow that sort of stuff. They say you can even watch TV in the waiting room?

-- Only the local boring stuff. And there's so many willing to, there's a real contest for it. Well, nothing too great. And behind the wall they're writing reports about how we react to certain films.

-- That's not entertainment, that's lab data... Means that we're also paying for others' music. That isn't fun.

-- Yeah. You know, I think your building is more fun. I mean, I wouldn't go to D even threatened by death...

The only rule of free commuting between buildings, whomever it was made by, is that you can only commute to buildings neighboring your own.

As a patient from C building, I can be in either B or D.

Ishizue-san, as a patient from A building, can't go further than B building.

You can say it like that: patients from A and D can't meet.

The patients are divided between A to D by, of course, the development level of their agonistic syndrome. A is mild, D is heavy.

*

Patients are sent to A building if they have no visible outgrowths or changes. Or those that had complications from a wound dealt by carrier. Normal patients.

"Ishizue-san is obviously normal" - and envious glance.

If it wasn't for isolation and limitations of free time, their life was like that of normal people. Schedule: three examinations per day... well, many types of examinations... chat with arbitrary patients. Ishizue-san says there are about twenty patients there. The inside structure of the building is quite right too, except for one room for special examinations by a private medical expert that is out of ordinary.

I don't know what's common between patients of building B. They look like relatively stable and curable people, even though with some neoformations. It almost looks like surgical intervention is all they need.

Not the level where removal of neoformation leads to death. I'm making this conclusion based on Dr. Dolittle's words, that when they find a way for surgical intervention, they remove the infected organ.

As the symptomatics are completely individual, investigations are proceeding sluggishly. Everyone needs their own surgery, and development of new

medicaments and techniques is not an easy task, so surgeries are very rare. Building B has the most patients. They also have the classiest waiting room. Well, and our building, C, is for those patients whose symptoms are stabilized as "A-syndrome," possessed.

It's actually not as dangerous here as in B building. Patients whose conscience is breached are not allowed outside their chambers, and the ones that are allowed out are stable and won't go rampaging again.

But patients with weird body parts, even the slightest, don't leave their rooms, and as a result the building is empty like a jail.

I was in the D building only once.

If C building is a jail, then D is ruins. Even doctors with security guards are only appearing near the entrance. Most patients are afraid of light, so corridors are barely lit, almost like a cave. When I thought about escaping from here, I decided that I should know at least the basic layout of D building, but I couldn't even reach waiting room.

From what I got to know, patients there were in the last stage of syndrome.

Procedures and amputations don't work. You can say they're fully developed.

Only about three people are living there, the other forty are in "seclusion".

By the way, around half a year ago, they moved a new patient to D building. It was the biggest all hands' job in past two years. Clinic's been in a wild turmoil, and after three days of some mega-surgery the almost dead patient was checked for life signs and sent to D building.

Doctors that carried out the surgery for some reason dropped him to a mixer, but somehow he still lived - or so they say.

Anyway, that's how the building D is, holding an army of monsters.

*

-- How do you think, what are the "possessed", Ishizue-san? Unfortunate people with a terrible disease or creatures that are not human anymore? - in a waiting room with nothing but corpses, I asked the only living creature. Looks like he felt weak for a bit, remembering D building.

-- Who knows... I'm not a doctor, I don't know the definition of "human". When something inside or outside changed, but you don't know how it was originally, you can't say what the difference is.

Clever analogy. Even doctor doesn't know that until the autopsy.

-- For us, normally living - well, yeah. Maybe those that you can talk to normally are the human ones?

Difference between medical and philosophical definition of human. Hm, Ishizue-san seems to give a lot of meaning to mental part. And ignores logic too much...

-- ... Cool. I wish you were my upperclassman, I would attend school properly then. You just don't give a damn about anything, do you? I could lend money from you, and you would forget about it the next day.

-- I would. But it's okay, I'm writing down that sort of stuff.

Paintbrush moves on the canvas. Canvas is eighty percent black by now. It's not just that he doesn't wish to paint anything in particular, he also makes mistakes a lot, and produces such a result that even an abstractionist would faint after seeing. And it's almost completed.

-- Anyway, it's nothing to be thinking deeply about. Possession is just like catching cold. Possessed aren't guilty, and the main problem is what to do with them after that.

Ishizue-san's logic is built from a safe distance - absolutely thoughtless idealism. But... I have to agree with that formulation...

-- Yeah. I envy those who caught cold.

-- If you're unfortunate enough, you'll catch it, whoever you are.

... He just doesn't understand, after all. People that catch cold are those that have weak health from the start.

-- Well, but why are you saying that? Word "possessed" isn't used much around here, is it?

-- I just remembered building D, and started thinking seriously if we're really human.

Paintbrush freezes. Ishizue-san makes a funny face again.

-- You know what, Hisaori... About that monster cemetery there, forget it, don't think about it, don't even say it. It holds the real demons. I'm sure that if you speak in medical terms, these are aliens.

-- Oh come ooon. Doctor said there was a girl, beautiful like a flower. Came half a

year ago, she was around fourteen. He said the "gothic lolita" dress fits her perfectly or something like that.

-- Don't take Dr. Dolittle seriously. It's just his passion for lolis. Uncurable disease, "pedophilia". And it wasn't "gothic", it was a wedding dress. Blackened with blood.

-- Huh, how do you know that?

-- What? I came here half a year ago too.

Ah, got it. Explanation accepted. Bold paintbrush movements resume.

It's really amazing - he's drawing such a crappy painting, but movements of his right hand are so fresh and perfect.

Ishizue-san is very attentive, and answers anything you ask him. Even though four out of five answers he says with uninterested face, it's interesting to watch such live mimics, adding special nuances to all of his words.

-- Ishizue-san, what were you doing outside?

-- Nothing much. Lived normally, got wounded normally, normally finished a monster, just that.

I'm watching every wrinkle of his while he says that.

I stop feeling my limbs and just concentrate on watching. It feels like I'm made of eyes alone.

-- And before that? You look twenty or so, were you studying?

-- Half a year in a university. Just made the report on social relationships, when everything went down.

I'm counting his pulse, breathing rythm.

Meaningless topics, meaningful topics; topics that he likes and topics he doesn't like - I'm raising any question I can and correct it with *real him* inside my head.

-- You didn't have a lover, right? You're so cold.

-- Who knows. Maybe I had, but I don't remember.

This guy doesn't remember even THAT sort of stuff?!

... But his reaction was valuable, that's why I'm not going to be mad for now.

Thousands of things I should watch. Silent pauses are very important. As the time passes, little by little I merge my imagination with Ishizue-san's. I like this simple work of mine.

Music is heard. Corpsies are starting to slug out of the waiting room. Ishizue-san

doesn't seem to care - so it was a sonata for B building patients just now.

-- Say, Ishizue-san. What do you think of God?

I'm asking this last question while thinking if I should watch and learn from him or not.

I already decided to keep our friendship forever, but there is still one line that is yet to be confirmed. I should make at least that sure while I still can.

-- I don't see a connection. Why that all of a sudden?

-- Well, we started from demons, means God is next.

-- Ah, in this way. We didn't have that sort of stuff, I don't know about Buddha either. If you want to talk about God, talk to Dolittle, he's gonna keep you occupied for the whole night.

-- I don't mean the definition of God or belief. What do you imagine when you hear "God"?

-- Nothing. Emptiness. No shadow, no looks, no smell, no feel.

He understands God like that. It's not that "God is an empty concept", but that "God is emptiness itself", half-belief. It's different from my view on that, but it's acceptable. Even if I don't know how he thinks, I can understand him.

-- How about you, Hisaori? Do you believe in God?

-- Not as much believe as worship. Not to God, but to what symbolizes him. What if you could give form to God? What would you imagine him as?

-- It's a task like "draw air"... Well, if he's that great and almighty then an eye or light, maybe?

He wasn't hesitating with his answer at all. He didn't even give me a wry smile for giving him an uninteresting question, he acts just as Ishizue-san I imagined.

-- I would imagine him as a hand. If God is an object that gave mind to human, then human's hand is the God himself.

-- What? What's that, anthropomorphism?

-- It's result of mind. That what people have, but animals don't - that's the hand.

-- I don't get it. Mind is brain, isn't it? That's where knowledge is collected.

-- Don't say it like that, even animals have brains. And human's mind is worthless to an animal. It doesn't have any abilities superior to theirs. Isn't brain just a machine to move your hands?

Oh damn. He just gave me such a weird look. I'm kind of uncomfortable, but he's my new friend, so I'll get mad later. I'll just have fun for now.

-- If you say so. But it means that we both lost God.

-- Yeah. But there's nothing we can do about that - it's normal for demon-possessed.

From that simple element, Ishizue's hand that felt so alive stops. For the last time he moves his paintbrush and mumbles: "Well, something like that".

-- Oh, you're finished?

-- If I continue, it will turn out all black. And it's almost time to go back, great moment.

He starts to gather the painting tools, scattered in the waiting room for about a week. Is he mad at me for bringing up that topic?

-- Ishizue-san, what are you going to do with this picture?

-- I don't need it. I'll give it to Dr. Dolittle, and it'll be burned in a couple years, I guess?

-- Aww, how can you say that? Give it to me, please. I don't promise to keep it perfectly, but it would at least decorate my room.

He looks at me amazedly again.

Ishizue-san kept thinking, making faces, but in the end he decided that it would be too much of a hassle to bring it with him.

-- Alright. But know that: even if you try to return it, I'm not taking it back.

-- Okay. Don't wave your copyrights in front of me then, yourself.

With incredible agility Ishizue-san picked up everything with one hand and went back to building A.

I'm looking at the finished painting.

Strokes, which render eighty percent of the picture black. I thought it was a butterfly with scattered wings, but after investigating it closer I understood the simple theme of it.

The sign "Arika" in a corner, and two children holding hands.

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The heavier the symptoms of patients, the more breaks in their schedule.

Waking up at six. Breakfast at seven. Examination after breakfast, dinner, and free time till lunch. That's what it's like for me in C building, in D building they probably don't even get fed.

Patient-like lives are spent in B and A buildings. Ishizue-san is always relaxed, but in difference from me he only has lunch break as free time.

His day is like that: waking up, being with me till breakfast, then a round on internal therapy, external therapy, psychotherapy, chat with other patients, P.E., examination by medical expert (aka questioning), and so on - incredibly detailed schedule. And you can't skip anything, clinic keeps watch on all of your movements. Examination is alright, but what is that marathon for? And I felt bad that Ishizue-san was the only one to go through that. To keep up the talk with him, I am following similar schedule as much as possible.

And then - it seems like my wish came true.

For the first time since my arrival I was sent to torture room... I mean, examination room.

-- Nice to meet you... well, no. We already met when you were just brought here. Okay, sit down now, time's not waiting.

Too big of a room for examination room, not enough items in it. High ceiling, glassed watching room at around the height of a second story. Feels like you're a single white chip on a "go" board. The room is tilted, the patient's entrance is below, and the entrance she used is on top.

In the middle of a tilted room is a table and two chairs on different sides of it. On a higher chair sits a woman in a business suit.

Touma Mato. Ishizue-san calls her Mato-san, sometimes Tomato-san, but to me it's just an unattractive woman in her thirties.

Touma Mato is imposing, like devil looking down on a sinner in hell. Normally this room would be making people think they became smaller, but that woman instead made the size of the room pressuring. I heard that Mato-san feels like "three of these hospitals", but who would've thought it's true?

-- It's hard with you, both sister and brother... Did you hear the news about your parents? Yesterday they gave a conclusive verdict. The case would be viewed from a point where Hisaori Koji and Hisaori Kayo's deaths were an accident.

Rejoice, it means you're free now. So if you want to, I can give a permit for your discharge by symptomatic improvements.

-- ...

I'm at loss of words from the sudden turn of events. She amazed me, "amazed" being a perfect word for this case.

-- Just a minute, what do you mean by that? Symptomatic improvements... My illness is going to be cured?

-- Dumbass. How can it be cured? I'm talking about mental state. Question is, "Do you regret almost killing a human"?

... Terrifying. Not the content of her words - her glare is terrifying. The eyes of Touma Mato in her best favor don't see a human in me. Her carelessness comes from the fact that if I move even a finger, a trigger is going to come off in my chair, but she still doesn't see me even in point-blank range. Even garbage or dirt are looked upon better than that.

-- So, if the psychiatrist says that everything's okay, I'll have ambulatory treatment?

-- Yeah. It's going so well you get nauseous, right? We're not doing charity here, we can't waste our money on civilians in vain.

When we get spare, we want to fill our wallets. Hisaori, do you know how much every one of you corpses cost to contain? Keeping a whole C building of patients without a hope for cure just doesn't make sense to me.

To contain and to keep alive are synonyms. I don't want to talk with her a second longer, but if Ishizue-san is doing it, I can't back off either.

-- Am I guaranteed normal life after discharge? After all, I'm just used to give an example of a carrier patient getting back to society.

-- Wow.. what an unpleasant worldly wisdom. Ah yes, two years ago there were talks about human rights... You're right, this decision was made for the clinic, not for its patients. We had the health center here gathering possessed from all around the country. No discharged in ten years - what a great image.

Thoughtful consent. Did they select some patients that are harmless to let outside, and chose me among them?

Two years ago there was a debate between "protectors", calling carriers "victims",

and a group screaming "murderers". Some were saying that "protectors" were backed up by some influential people and this clinic just barely avoided dismounting. Some underground debates seem to continue even now.

-- Well, that's just one of the reasons. Main is money. The budget wasn't made for us until this year. We don't have issues, we don't give much income, and consumption is high, and we want to get rid of some unadequate patients. While there is still some sense, time and money are unlimited, but, to be honest, we should save up where we can.

She probably says what is meaningless to say to give us the reality. "Don't even think that; Clinic will never see you as normal people. Even when you're outside, don't dare to think of yourself as adequate."

-- ...I see. If you behave, you're chosen as candidate for discharge, is that right?

-- Yeah. We want to discharge at least five. And in a year, if you keep pretending to be a good boy, I'll recommend you. Nice, isn't it? No need to resent. Just don't screw up.

-- Don't be like that. I... really resent, you know.

-- Great. Kinui-san's efforts don't go to waste. Just one thing, Hisaori. Recently you got quite lively. You can see that clearly even through the monitors. Did you get a new toy?

Her glare alone makes me want to vomit.

If I really get out, first thing I need to do is kill this woman. Even I can understand that, and I'm bad with intuition stuff. She's the enemy that you kill before she kills you first.

-- Ah, right... Is Ishizue-san a candidate for discharge too?

-- What?

I'm feel pressed to the floor by hellish aura of Touma Mato.

Rumors are that Ishizue-san is called her "favorite toy".... Well, I wouldn't say so, judging by her reaction.

Touma Mato tries to look gently now, but her face expression gives her out.

Those were the movements of tiny muscles that no one but me could see, but she was definitely compassionate. Touma Mato doesn't want Ishizue-san to be discharged not because it's dangerous, but because she's pitying him.

-- Dr. Touma, what about me? Recommendation is not approval, after all. Thanks for selecting me candidate, but you don't want to let me out, do you?

-- Ah, you're alright. You're stubborn, so to let you out is easiest... You won't get into any dirt, and you'll make it through anywhere. So much that I want to make you my personal pony when this all settles down.

Touma Mato maliciously curves her mouth and roughly glares at me.

Horrifying. That just now was her true opinion, that woman won't say a lie even in front of a carrier, compassion or favor won't wave her decisions the slightest.

She's the embodiment of law, that raised an iron hammer above us and waits for our first misstep, to wear our excuses and drop it down. That's how Touma Mato is. But nevertheless the chat was surprisingly pleasant. After some questioning it seems that Ishizue-san will get an admission for discharge in half a year's time, and for me it's a year. Thanks to Fortune suddenly smiling at me.

-- Ah, yeah, one more thing. There's a clinic's request here... Someone from D building wants to meet you very much. They approved the meeting already, go make a visit tomorrow morning. Here's a pen and paper, want to borrow them to write your will?

Of course, it's not a request, it's an order. I forgot that for the last couple years. For a pleasant talk they ask for a proper reward.

In a convoy with head physician, Dr. Dolittle and three watchers... I mean, guards, I'm going to D building. I can't refuse anyway, also that would be bonus point for me, and I'm a little curious myself.

The one who wants to meet with me is that newcomer one, that was brought here half a year ago. That what Touma Mato told me about without any particular interest seemed to be a question of life and death to clinic.

What was after my talk with Mato-san? After I came back to my chamber, I was begged to go there for half a day by a head physician. I was amazed that we have one in clinic, and my image of clinic's world got completely overturned after I saw staff, normally ordering us around, obey orders of their patient.

Head physician was with me until we reached waiting room in D building, after which he retreated to building C. Looks like D building is so alienated to people that building C feels like a safe zone in comparison...

To start with, everything around looks rough. The floor and walls are same as those other buildings have, but they look feeble, like they've been in ruins for past ten years.

-- Well, let's go. There are other patients here, so be quiet.

Look, even Dr. Dolittle is nervous. Guards sincerely hold their weapons in front of them. Submachineguns... Hilarious. Are we in front of a triumphal arch?

Bang!

Feels like I'm taking a step into a building that is to be demolished a moment before it is brought down. I do a step forward, and something crumbles somewhere in a building. Of course, it's an illusion. Construction of D building was the most costly - they hold patients in the latest stage of the syndrome here, they can't afford to make it weak.

Narrow, long passageway goes on and on. Each six meters it intersects with another ones like that, and the sight is same everywhere. It looks like D building is a labyrinth made of intersections like that... Reminds me of insides of a Rubik's cube.

Dimly lit with electric lights ash-colored world. No windows, no doors, even chambers are unnoticeable. It was a primitive world made of ash walls, a strange world of an abstract painting. And as I walk here, I become a part of it.

Dr. Dolittle turns for the third time, to left now. I don't see the way back, already for a while now. Suddenly I lag behind Dolittle for about one second, and hallway in front of me catches my eyes.

Bang.

The passageway was scarlet-black. If you looked closer, it was a passageway

made of various dead bodies. Cemented part of it turned into a pipe of flesh. In it, there was mother, with blood-soaked stomach, and father, with blood gushing from his neck.

Ahh... Even though I wasn't next to them back then, the image of a heartbroken Hisaori Shinya is going to reflect in tears...

-- Hisaori-san, it's wrong way. This way.

Dolittle's voice distracts me before I step there.

Bang.

-- You shouldn't look into unnecessary passageways. We don't feel it, but sometimes it badly affects patients.

I ask to clarify, what does "badly affect" mean.

-- For an example: In a chamber you were looking at just now, two patients went missing.

There were patients who, like me, looked into different passageways. Then they walked into a chamber, and went missing... Obviously, they were hidden by a D building patient. Question is - how and where did he hide them? Did he crush their bodies to small sizes and hide them under his bed? Did he absorb them into his body?

When doctors stormed him with questions, he grinned and answered:

"They're thrashing about in my head!"

Bang.

I'm walking in a way not to lose sight of Dolittle. I am to meet a girl around fourteen years old. Brought here in pieces. No hands or legs, her torso minced.

Because of some mistake, she was still alive. Even A-syndrome infected - even possessed - die properly when they're killed. She's going to be bound to bed for the rest of her life, or maybe she's only alive in clinical sense - a brain floating in an aquarium or something like that...

Bang.

There are enough of rumors like that in D building. There's a horror story about a pool filled with guts, and since it was a single patient from the start, who was, to general inconvenience, still alive, it's impossible to clean there.

The pool doors are securely locked, so it's unconfirmed. No one feels like making sure of it, anyway.

Bang.

Dolittle opens a door.

A narrow tunnel appears in front of us. Looks like that's the last station. About ten meters inside it, there is another steel door.

-- As soon as you enter, this door is going to be locked. We'll wait here, so don't worry and talk to your heart's content. Ah, right: a minute after this door gets closed, the inside door will open.

Sickening. Maybe that's really a death sentence?

-- I know the answer already, but I'll ask anyway - can I borrow one of those from guards? For self-defense, you know.

-- Ha-ha-ha, don't exaggerate, it's not a wild beast there. By the way, they wouldn't open fire either. That sort of stuff isn't even a threat to her. What works are the multi-layered steel walls.

-- ...

Bang.

I regret my hastiness. Life and curiosity switched places for some reason.

I walk forward through the passageway. Behind me, the door closes - *bang*. In a minute, the front door opens. **Bang!**

-- Huh?..

I felt like I was warped in time. Or like I'm now in an imaginary world, after parting with life.

On the other side of a door was a gym, though still resembling ruins.

From the eight meter high ceiling, in the very middle of the room, that looked like a gym of an abandoned school, a human-size doll is hanging down. **Bang!** Oh, she jumped. Bound by a steel chain, doll, like a pendulum, flew sideways and hit cement wall. **Bang.** Pendulum, as expected, brings doll back.

It is caught by a human in the middle of a gym: "Hop!". The doll appears to be a sandbag, and it is patted by a gloved hand of incredibly resembling a flower...

-- Oh, you're here already. Hi-hi, Hisaori-san! I'm sorry, can you please stand there for a bit? I'm almost finished with my daily norm.

Bang. She does a wide step forward, swinging her right fist. The sandbag vertically, like dolphin, flies up to the eight meter ceiling.

It's the same carrier that was brought here half a year ago without a hope for recovery. That fourteen year old girl, who looked nothing else but twenty, was Ishizue-san's blood-related sister.

X X X

-- Are you sure your body is sturdy enough? - she was able to diagnose the carrier with a single sentence.

We got along right away; that comment was same as my own impression from long ago.

-- Me? The next day after I've shown symptoms, I was caught by that woman. She shot me down, cut me down, chopped me down... If she didn't want a lab sample, I think I would be dead gone by now.

Her presence was strong, overwhelming the feeling of reality of what's happening. If you think of C building patients as of ghosts or corpses, then she's literally a monster. Even for D building - stretched, but realistic - she's like an imbalanced manga character. Later Ishizue-san would say: "If Mato-san is a hero, then that is a superhuman". Those are really fitting categories. Any medic would say she's not human anymore.

And with her own hands Touma Mato brought this monster to half-death?

-- Well, I was a kid back then - but that's not an excuse. She came there - that was heaven's punishment for not giving a damn about reality.

Taking her boxing gloves off, she makes an awkward smile to cover her embarrassment. Long, silky, black hair. Antipode of Ishizue-san. Incomparable beauty - I think that's what it's called.

-- Next thing I knew, I was here. I learned just a single lesson out of it, after all. If you value your life, and you're not me - don't deny her. How about you, Hisaori-san?

I tell her the tale from two years ago. She wanted to know it all, and I tell her everything from the start.

Killed parents - no, now that everyone accepted it as accident - watched my parents die, and pushed my older sister named Hisaori Makina, trying to save them, out of the flat - that's the story of Hisaori Shinya. Sister didn't die, but hurt her hand from the fall. She paid for her life with a dysfunctional hand.

-- Yeah, unfortunate... Didn't work out as planned...

Yeah. From long ago, nothing goes well.

Even when it all happened, everything was going slim, but after it's over - I'm back to starting point.

It's like... The winning prize was bankruptcy. Like the game that you play itself is made so that no one ends up well.

-- Heee. Do you like to play musical chairs?

I don't have interest in games like that.

Even in such a simple game as musical chairs, I never could win. I like watching it instead of playing. I don't want to sit on the chair, and I wasn't admiring those that conquered their seats. I was content with just sitting on the floor, watching winners and learning from them.

"Stupid... Bye-bye, Shinya..."

Things took a strange turn, when...

-- Aaah. Let me warn you. Try not to find an ideal chair.

-- What?

-- Well, you're an observer, right? Someone's already sitting on a chair. For Hisaori-san, there are no unoccupied chairs. And when you find an ideal chair, you won't be able to sit on it, until you remove the one sitting there already. Right? Watching and learning is good, but if you start dreaming about it - you'll turn into ugly possessed again.

-- You're locked here because you can't hold yourself together, - she concluded. - If you would want to sit on a chair, things would happen... "That's why be more careful." - I was scolded by a girl five years younger than me.

Someone who is already sitting on it. Can't sit before getting rid of the real one... But her concern isn't needed. Because until now I didn't ever want to sit on a single chair.

X X X

Our talk after that became completely like girls'. We talked for almost an hour, and we agreed to meet once a week. That said, I get up from the floor.

-- Oh, by the way, how do you know about me, when you're not leaving here?

-- Ah, that... You're talking with my brother, right? I felt like you're a nice guy. And actually, I have a small favor to ask of you.

She sticks out her tongue.

Collected, like an adult woman, she gives me a smile of a naughty girl.

-- Can you please somehow delay the discharge of my brother?

Of course, I can't do that kind of a favor.

I could give Ishizue-san some problems, and I wouldn't mind doing so for his sister, but because of the tricks needed for that I would have to sacrifice myself, and that would delay my own discharge. I mean, no, that woman would surely exclude me from the candidate list forever.

Tormented by the dilemma between helping Ishizue-san or his sister, I couldn't fulfill her wish until the very end... Well, whatever. I didn't need to sacrifice myself after all.

-- Hi there, Ishizue-san. Shogi today?

-- ?..

While solving a shogi etude, Ishizue-san is looking at me, puzzled. He reacts just like when we first met.

-- Are you okay? It's me, Hisaori.

-- Hisaori?... Ah, right, you fit Hisaori image. Sorry for comparing it too long. I only see you during the day, after all. So, what's up with that? Did you fall?

-- Ah, that? That's after surgery. Everything was bad there for a while, so I just told them to amputate it.

Ishizue-san nods, murmurs: "Is that so.", - and writes it down to his notepad. Single-handed, but how agile.

-- I came to say goodbye today. We won't see each other again.

Even though routine life of buildings doesn't change, days and months are passing by. We rejected the world, which is amazingly caring about us, and almost irresponsibly helps the outcast.

-- Yeah. You're weird. It's taboo to talk to other patients here. They did tell you that when carriers communicate, a devil gets attached to the one you talk to?

-- You're the one to talk, Ishizue-san. I'm not talking to those that seem unable to answer, and you don't know the limit to it... I wanted to ask this for a while, why do you not feel danger?

-- That's my disorder.

-- Not that you're forgetting everything?

-- I can fight that one, so whatever. And this one isn't that bad either.

"This one" is that bad, what are those wide gestures?.. I can sort of understand his sister's worries.

-- You should instead tell me, what was up with you, Hisaori? Why did you talk to me all of a sudden? I thought no one here has interest in anyone but himself.

-- I guess so. But I only have interest in everyone but myself.

-- Wow, - Ishizue-san stops his etude. Gray-haired and single-handed guy watches me with his eyes, without a trace of interest on that topic: - And why is that?

-- Maybe because I can't be allowed to think about myself? I'm very temperamental, so to say. It's hard for me to keep my emotions under control, from the time I was a kid. I get mad, I get depressed, and I can't stop until the reason is gone.

For example, if I read a sad story, it's getting into me, and I can't get over it myself. The story doesn't solve itself, so I'm depressing until I think of a deconstruction for the plot.

While I was a kid, it didn't bother me, but near the end of grade school I had a personal crisis. My feelings were my greatest enemy, so I had to take the urgent measure of rejecting myself.

-- Yeah, that's inconvenient. Is that temperamentality congenital?

-- I think I had the roots for it. But it fully bloomed around fifth grade of grade school.

I don't remember it clearly, but my sister said I saw a ghost and, uh, went loony. So, we lived on a third floor of a cooperative high-rise building. I was standing on a balcony, repeating: mom, dad, cool, there's a human burning!

-- Wow, what a story. Was a human burning, uh, still alive?

-- Yes, still alive. It looked like he's supposed to be like that - black from the burns, he was crossing the yard diagonally! No, now I can think of some real explanations why did it happen like that. But for me as a child it was a ghost and nothing else.

Ishizue-san frowned.

After his sister became my best friend, I had some regret left. He listened to this

story not as to a tale of a sort, but as to a witness's story. He made a puzzled face, because he was contemplating the kid that was treated like that. And there - adagio. Just like on the day we met, lazy music sounds.

-- It's time for me to go back. So it's time for farewells. Should we do a handshake, in the end?
I extend my right hand.

-- No, sorry. My credo is no handshakes.

Ishizue-san firmly rejects it. He denied the handshake itself, not the handshake with Hisaori Shinya.

If that's so, there's nothing I can do. Everyone has something they don't like. And we can't do a normal handshake, after all.

Without touching, we say goodbye in words alone.

A new day. "As this is the very last time", Dolittle told me, "his disease is that he has no memories of what happened during the day."

Now some riddles were solved. That's what his forgetfulness was about, the one I couldn't find consistency in.

-- ...

Only now, when we can't see each other again, I realize that he was in this building not without a reason.

Ishizue Arika is reborn every day.

If you round it up, he's a guy who lives only "today". And while being like that, he was still leading a human life. A human without definite present is living while looking forward to future.

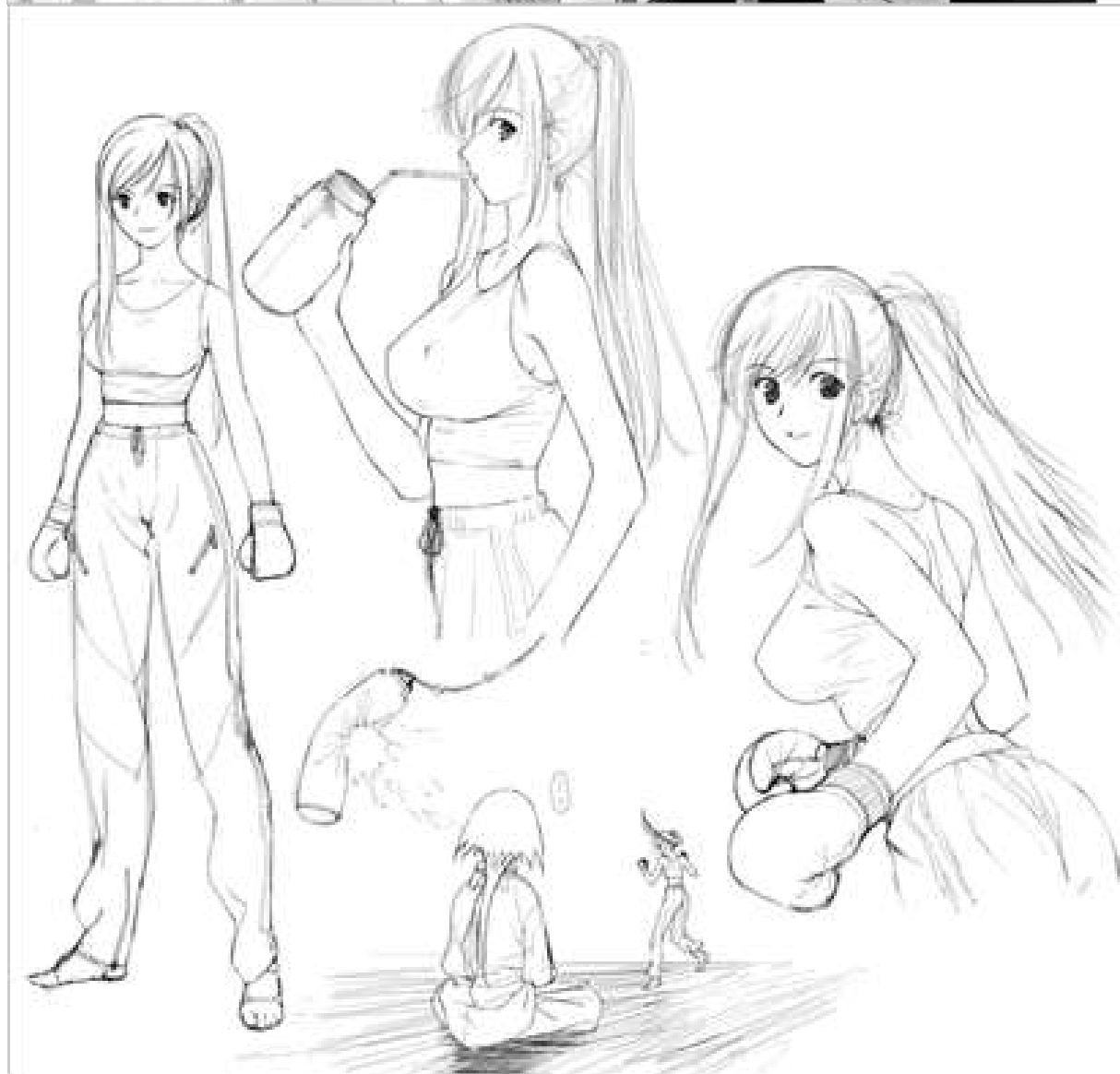
Even when his sister appeared to be a biological monster.

I think Ishizue Arika has very high mental endurance.

That ability is the one I don't have, even though I probably need it.

Whatever, enough of the clinic's stories.

I'm going to be discharged soon. When I'm finally discharged, first thing first I'll do is pay a visit to Ishizue-san. Fortunately, we're from the same prefecture. If we both live to that day, we'll meet again soon - that is life.





*

I may be not the one to talk, but...

That was the worst and the best return to society.

-- There. You can leave today.

Mato-san stated that and left, saying she's got something to do and that we'll meet soon. Woah, wasn't that too easy? I thought some trouble was bound to pile up, but clinic handled it all in a blink of eye. Like a deal in the shop.

-- Don't you think it all happened too fast, Doctor?

One hour before my discharge.

I came to Dr. Dolittle's confessional to say my goodbyes and decided to be soggy for a while.

-- Isn't that great? Touma-san is courteous to you in a way. She's kind to those in fragile positions.

-- Ew, that's such an obvious lie. I'm worried about you, Doc. You don't know women.

If that was the kindness shown to weak, then Touma Mato failed to express it. Maybe she's possessed herself?

-- Well, let's talk about Touma-san some other time. Instead, let's back to what you want advice with, since you came here.

-- Bullseye. I've lived in this health center for so long that I became self-contained. I want to carelessly talk with people, but you see...

-- Ha-ha-ha. "I just can't integrate into society." - it was your complaint when you just came here.

-- It isn't funny. I'm still bad with it. Well, I'm going to go outside. Everyone's doing their best striving for glory, for success... I can understand that, it's enough for living a normal life. I heard that if I just start striving for it myself,

I'm going to integrate somehow. But... I can't even pretend to. Sounds awfully girlish, doesn't it? Touma Mato's scolding didn't help, so I'm looking for hope in some kind words now.

-- That's a problem. You are going to have to pretend as so... But after all, that is nothing else but a motive for human to curb human. Whether one's striving for glory, money, or power, one's doing it because he sincerely wants to be acknowledged by others. "How successful I am compared to others?", or, "I want to show my value". Get that?

-- I know. But I can't think of it as important.

-- Obviously. You don't even think that you have a value.

-- ...

Looks like I failed at some point. Dolittle stings me today.

-- Listen. One who wasn't loved without wanting nothing in return - human, pressured by society, has already lost value of himself, in a way. He wasn't loved, so he didn't get a place in life. He can't even think that he has a value. For all his life he's looking down.

-- That deficiency, that minus cannot be compensated, - he continues. - Human himself can't compensate that defect.

Dolittle stayed silent for a while.

-- There is only one solution. If you don't see it yourself, you have to get in touch with the one who acknowledges your value. You don't need self-confidence, you need someone that needs you. Search for it, with your life on the line. You should live for that.

-- ...

What a climax. I underestimated good ol' Dolittle. I can't even blush before such dramaticism. The one who gave him the nickname of a literature hero was a genius.

Well, it doesn't matter. I was a bit touched by Dolittle's words. I don't perceive them, but he showed me the right direction, clean and clear.

-- So I have to search for my soulmate of a sort? Is there really such a convenient person out there?

-- Ha-ha-ha, I can't promise that. Did you make any friends in clinic?

"Yes", I answer.

Dolittle cheerfully smiles:

-- Then it's okay, you've got all chances!

Just that... I made friends, but what's the point if I forget them (and I'll forget them, most probably)?

-- Oh, they're calling for us. Go up to the A building's roof. If you want me to, I can keep you company until the helipad. Wouldn't it be heavy to carry all your stuff yourself?

-- Nah, I'm not a child, and there's only one bag of it. But was that me, or did I just hear something cool? Like, "helicopter".

-- Touma-san didn't tell you? You can only get to this clinic by air. The roof is like main entrance.

-- Got it. Guess you wouldn't have any fugitives this way.

And anyway.

Slowly though, but I'm getting it now. This is not a clinic. This is a natural purgatory.

*

A-syndrome infected can't move to another prefecture. Dangerous ones are under strict national control, observation, and guidance, so I was sent back to my old place right after discharge, Shikura town in C prefecture.

Helicopter first, then a car - three hours on the road, summary. I thought I'd be blindfolded or something, but no, they just gave me a normal ride. Like I'm some juvenile delinquent on accounting.

Even though I was quickly moved to my place, and in just three hours I was at my good old home, I still felt the reality of those isolation buildings. It still feels real, when you can get to the other world in a couple of hours.

-- As your relatives refuse to accept you, - explains in a blank tone the man with the short hedgehog-style haircut, sitting near me in a black suit and shades - you're going to an establishment. We'll destroy your driving license. Bring the registration and insurance papers to that instance tomorrow.

Government was distributing residences to A-syndrome infected, and to victims of those. Something like municipal apartment. One old municipal dorm for victims and underpaid was refactored for our needs. Well, I'm saying "our" needs, but I was the only rehabilitated carrier there. Maybe some more will come later, but for the main part it still remained a place for the brotherhood of low-paid.

Flat rent is a four digit number, ten times lower than usual, one that any landlady would be amazed with. For carriers lacking ability to get a job a small bonus is given for living expenses. Another bonus is the hedgehog-medical expert neighbor, that does an investigation when something unpleasant happens.

-- Well, I'll leave the next procedure to the manager. Once a day, at 9 AM or at 6 PM, call this number.

Forgetting to mention the most important part - what happens if you don't call - hedgehog left.

"And so...", I mumble, fix the bag in my hand and look at the crumbling building. Concrete and metal six-story building, windows pressed to the inside. By the looks of it, there are eight apartments on each floor. The entrance is narrow, desolate and dirty. Air is incredibly musty, only yakuza hang out in that sort of places.

-- Hm, not bad.

Compared to that hospital, not outside look, not inside look, not the dirt matter at all.

Yahoo, congratulations! Goodbye, gray clinic! My new life starts here, in this mouldering happy flophouse number 13 in Shikura town!

-- Ahh, a newcomer? Well... I won't say a thing even if you look like a devil, but no conflicts, alright? Here's your key. Lights and water will be on tomorrow, no complaining today.

The beautiful new sheet of my life was ruined in just a few seconds.

-- What an unfriendly old woman...

Nevertheless, it's good.

With such a negligent watch, with such a negligent supervisor, I just have to stay inside, and she won't come to my apartment. I started humming a song from such a good news while getting up to third floor. There were no numbers on doors

whatsoever, and the door told me about its thirty year old age with a screech.

-- Oh? You're the newcomer?

I was in a battle with the doorknob at the moment, which refused to turn, when some guy leisurely walked up to me. Amazingly cordial for such a place, he could live on a Paradise island; wearing makeup, aged around thirty. Dude, don't wear that Hawaiian shirt, it suits you too much.

-- Wow, I finally have a neighbor! I'm Niijima, what's your name?

-- Hi. I'm Ishizue. Name's Arika, written as "shozai".

-- Oh. You have some stupidly-childish name, boy. He-he-he, - laughs Niijima.

Later we'll get to know how much more stupid is his own name, but that's a different story.

-- Glad to make an acquaintance. If I need something, can I ask you?

-- Sure. Ah, how great, the young people decorate the house. Though Arika-chan, you're slightly not my type~

That's great. Gay people in Hawaiian shirts are slightly not my type either.

One month passed so fast I didn't notice.

I'm going for the casual shopping. Surveys[*] around the building, full freedom after job search. I got so carried away with the preparations for my new life that I forgot what to do.

I slightly regret relaxing too much.

I just kept avoiding my old acquaintances, my old pathways, kept guarding and guarding myself, and forgot the most important.

-- Yeah... I should come back home at least once.

Ishizue residence is a mansion on a Shikura hill, second block. Separated from the opposite block by a station, it takes about an hour to get there on foot, twenty minutes on a bus and less than fifteen minutes on car.

Town might seem like a narrow place, but it's pretty wide. You don't have interest in citizens from the other side of a station, unless you're acquainted - that's the feature of a modern society. Of course - we live near a single shop, but

we only go to work, home and for food. And for class, to bar, book shop and mall.
That's all.

That's why I didn't have a reason to come back to Ishizue residence, but I should at least do it once, to not regret not going there later.

Covered by the dark night, I'm walking to the Shikura hill.

Hill - it isn't just a name, a perpetually sleepy district is built here, and precisely at midnight everyone's sleeping already.

I'm walking under the street lights. Hmm, here's Kizaki, Ishimori, Yamanashi, Ishizue. Maybe everyone has insomnia or something, but the lights are on everywhere. Only Ishizue mansion is drowned in darkness.

-- Tch. Closed...

That would be obvious, if you think about it. But since I came here, I don't feel like going back empty-handed, and no one's here anyway. I walk to the back of the mansion, move a hand to the kitchen window - it opens instantly. Amazing luck. I didn't have to break windows and bother neighbors... Of course, I don't mind saying hi to the people that will come running, but it's easy to imagine their reaction from seeing me. I'm not used to living with a single hand, I don't feel like adding stress to that.

-- Well, hello, home sweet home.

I'm coming inside the house, empty from since that event happened.

-- Hmm? Wow, everything's cleaned. Wasn't there a sea of blood here?

They restored it all and are waiting until everything settles down?.. Then my room's going to be cleaned too. I walk up to the second floor. The door leading to my room is brand new. Well yeah, I heard Mato-san destroyed it completely with a shotgun.

-- Hooo. Almost untouched inside!

I'm looking at the space that was Ishizue Arika's room some time ago.

I fall on bed and now look up to ceiling.

-- Oh, I see bullet holes.

Construction workers, don't slack! You can't sell it expensively like that.

I spent about three hours at home, satisfying my nostalgia. If you look around the house, you can see how it was used before. I'm leaving behind this shortly mine, and now newly decorated home. I have a new life too. And this house can't be untouched for long.

Whatever. It doesn't concern me anyway.

*

Two months passed, and I became used to my new life.

I grew attached to my 2DK-apartment already, and grasped the way of living in this town.

Not too comfortable, but enough for living normally.

There is just one problem left.

While in the isolator, Ishizue Arika was, out of his own volition, trying out arm prostheses, and not a single one fit, leaving him single-handed. And since he's discharged now, the problem would probably be a bother to him. Maybe it's pointless, but I can't just ignore that.

For starters, I paid a visit to a neighboring medical doctor and told him my requirements for a prosthesis, and now am going home. When suddenly... In the rusty mailbox I spot a suspicious mail.

-- No sender, nothing...

A big envelope. Tightly sealed, and looks quite expensive, the one they send cash in.

Puzzled, I come back to my room, lie on bed and open the envelope.

An unhealthy amount of 10000-yen notes appears... A feeling of weirdness gets stronger than that of happiness.

-- ...

Trying not to think about anything, I count the notes. Eighty of them, more than my yearly salary.

-- Throwing them out is... too early, I lent some money from Niijima-chan...

Oh grief, I had no money after discharge, of course. The tragedy where poverty is born. How sometimes you have to bear the obvious root of evil!

-- But giving it to police is a problem too...

I can leave that sort of thing in my memory, but not in notes. My life would be ruined.

-- I guess I can just watch the turns of events for about half a month now...

That's how it ended. Seeing how it all was obviously a mistake, I'll just take care of the money for now. If an owner is found, I'll just return them. Half a year after you pick up something it becomes yours, anyway.

-- Eh? Or was it a year? And not the whole amount?

Well, that was a trifle matter.

Because on the next month, this time pushed right into the mailbox, same envelope appeared before me.

*

-- Arika-chan, are you involved with some bad company?

-- No, good morning.

Gloom from the very morning.

Knocking at my door like a hitting a sandbox, Niijima-chan, right after seeing me, gave me this phrase, as if to scold me for my sleepy look. With all those mysterious envelopes it's me who wants to ask this question...

-- Do you have some business with me, Niijima-chan? I was going to have breakfast.

-- Oh wow, just in time! Great, Arika-chan, it will be fun breakfast!

-- I don't get it... Just say what you have to say and leave, Niijima-chan.

-- Yeah, yeah. Arika-chan, you're looking for a hand prosthesis, right? You have a guest that wants to talk to you about that.

-- Huh?..

I'm violently scratching back of my head. Coming to these slums just for that...

Does that trader really have nothing to do?

-- I don't like this. Is he waiting in the lobby?

-- Nope, in "Marion" at the opposite side of the street. Oh, you're barely making it for the "morning"!

-- Sure... Normally it would be fine, but I guess I don't mind eating "morning" in Marion.

For free, to top it off.

I'm quickly dressing up, walking past the guardian booth - empty, as usual - and to the corridor.

At the opposite side of building 13 there is an unexpectedly stylish cafe "Marion". Thing is, the average price there is as much as 800 yen.

"Welcome", I'm invited by a gallant cafe owner, and I enter. I found the trader without trouble, there was only one new face here.

-- Hello, I'm Ishizue. Are you selling the arm prostheses?

-- Yes. My name's Yamada. Good morning, Ishizue-kun.

Male, about forty years old. Nothing distinctive, usual gentleman. I ask for a "morning set" and sit in front of him.

-- So, which clinic are you from?

I ordered the prostheses about a month ago, they all should come later.

-- No, I'm not from a clinic. I'm coming here on a different matter, so to say. I heard you're looking for a quality prosthesis.

Wow. Of course Niijima-san would act suspiciously, that gentleman is over the top suspicious type.

-- I'm listening. Say it already.

I'm ready to answer "no", but that gentleman sure is going to pay for my already ordered "morning set".

His speech crossed the border of "suspicious" and became a little hilarious.

Long story short: On Shikura's outskirts lives a kid - owner of unique arm and leg prostheses, and his artificial arm might fit Ishizue-san? That's it. I don't have anywhere to get money from for that obviously expensive prosthesis, but that kid is looking for a sitter, or a steward, so if I'll be his steward, I might get to wear it for free.

-- Yeah... So, how do you know that?

-- I was helping the child until yesterday. Though, sadly, I got my settlement, - he says in a gloomy voice.

-- You mean you were fired? Heeee... I won't ask why, but why tell me?

Normally you get mad if you're fired.

-- Thing is that, of course, I could forget that all, but I still pity that child. I want to find a substitute to take my place, at least. Or else I will be tormented by my consciousness.

Gentleman explained steward's work and salary. Well, let aside the credibility, two hundred thousand per month for that sort of work is not at all bad. And the fact I won't meet any of my old acquaintances is just great.

-- I still have a question. Why me? It's strange to talk to ones like me, don't you think?

-- That kid is just like you. Possessed.

Ahh. That's how it is. Then it's reasonable to ask me, indeed. Who else would willingly look after a carrier?

-- Isn't he a hell-raiser, though?

-- Won't even move a finger. I guarantee your safety. As soon as you see him, you'll understand it.

I'm getting even more curious. I keep asking questions while finishing my "morning set", and I even asked for another cup of tea.

So, I decided to take a look at the workplace. I don't really need the money, but finding both work and prosthesis at the same time I thought was impossible. And that kid lives in Shikura outskirts, on a private land... Obviously some ridiculously rich girl. I promise to visit her tomorrow and stand up.

-- Thanks. Then I'll give you one more piece of advice of an experienced person. Gentleman smiles, and puts his hands together in a manner of a prayer.

-- The kid loves people very much, he won't get mad at any mean thing you tell him, at any attitude you give him. But remember, no matter how close you are, never tell him one thing...

I get chills. This courteous everyday gentleman unpleasantly moves corners of his mouth...

-- Never, under no circumstances suggest the kid to go outside. As soon as you say something of the like, you'll irreversibly turn into his absolute, full-fledged enemy.

... smiling, like a devil.

Shikura is a town of extremities. It looks like a middle-sized city near the railroad station, but the office buildings are only built near the town center, surrounded by forests and fields.

Walking from the station to the direction of residential array on Shikura hill, I pass the border of residential area, fields and parks showing before me as far as eye can see.

And so... This prosaic city, forests growing here and there, and in one of those forests lives a kid-owner of the hand prosthesis.

After going as far as I can on the bus, I get off and go into the forest, too big to be a private property. There were street lights in it, marking the road, and soon I arrived to the place I sought for.

Building, resembling a huge die. On a clearing stands a cube of a building, sized about ten meters in three dimensions. Yamada... fake name, probably... told me the reservoir is filled with water.

The steel door wasn't locked. Inside it is dark, sunlight lighting the stairway to basement. Unusually deep.

-- Creepy. And it's not even D building.

I'm more or less able to see, though. "Dragons live here", I feel with a chill.

Ability to discern unknown and death is common human trait.

-- I already agreed for a personal meeting though...

Promiscuity in actions is very like Ishizue Arika, but I made a promise and I have to keep it. Can't change it with fear alone.

I go downstairs, and the door closes. By itself! I go down the pitch black corridor,

walk quickly to a door and blindly search for an object resembling a handle. A classic door opens with a screech.

At the same moment...

-- Ahh...

... I look up. For the first time in my life, I feel what they call "fate". Yeah, I'm don't have the right to make jokes about Dolittle anymore. This room was ancient. Like a dark, uninhabited room, taken alone from a medieval castle. Floor is layed out in a chessboard style. Brick walls. Expensive furniture. Corner of a room has some random stuff stacked. Nothing like electric lamps, ceiling made of glass, in a manner of an aquarium. Sun lights the underground room, waving the rays in water.

-- Hello. Are you Ishizue Arika?

From the direction of a bed with a canopy in a middle of the room, I hear a voice. I get chills all over my back. I almost forgot who I am for a second there, but getting a hold of myself I get closer to the bed. I wanted to see, clearly see, who is the owner of this outworldly beautiful voice.

-- Oh, can you stop there please? Wow, really single-handed, just as I was told. A meter from the bed, I'm stopped.

Behind the vail dropped from a canopy, a figure in bed, a figure...

-- Woooooooooah!!!

W-w-what a cutie! What's that, who's that, how's that, do people like that even exist?! I met and saw a lot of charming ladies, but never such a breathtaking beauty! So fantasy happens in real world too!

-- He-ey... You're Ishizue Arika-san, right?

Black-haired girl looks at me, troubled.

... My mind is melting. And so, deep in the featherbed, there is a girl about fourteen years old. Rare light-gray eyes, absolutely black hair. Pajamas, ones you'd never get to wear, giving an idea about a very expensive doll.. Abnormally small body gives off excess likeness with a doll...

-- What the...

At that point, my raging mind freezes. It's not a small body. It's a lacking body.

No.

Completely not.

This beautiful doll doesn't have limbs at all.

I finally understand why am I going to be an attendant. And, to say, she can't even move, let aside harm anyone.

Perfection. It completely threw me off balance.

Who can even think of taking a creature like that outside? Girl and this room are complete. Girl without limbs. Forest people don't walk in. Basement under an aquarium. Ideally separated world, in a good sense. It's wonderful. Now I understand, I had to do it like that too!..

-- Ishizue-san? Ah, right. Prosthesis first, right? Can you wait a bit, please? My mood got worse somehow. It was on a table just now...

Girl alone can, at most, raise her head a bit.

Unwillingly, I look around.

Under the sofa there is a doberman-like dog with a bored look. Even when I entered, it kept sleeping, uninterested.

The room suddenly got darker. Raising my head up, I see a fish, like a shark, covering sun.

... I don't know where to start giving it a thought. The ceiling is glass, right? And there's a ten meter layer of water there. Water is very transparent, can fish actually live there? And why a shark, actually?

-- Well, so you have it. Looks like the appropriate hand prosthesis is sleeping at the moment. We can't have a deal like that...

Black-haired girl, with a sad look, averts her eyes. Wait just a second, girl, you make too much of an impression! Any man, respecting himself, would jump on her, hugging, or maybe choking, because it just can't be true.

-- Nah, I'll do it. I just have to take care of you, right?

-- You don't need the details?

-- Nah. I take it. Job's easy.

I'm still scared, to be honest. Dogs, sharks... This room is wrong. But the girl's beauty includes that fear, for sure.

-- I understand. You might've thought like, "He's scary", but thank you, Ishizue-san. You probably know it already, but my name's Karyou Kaie. Glad to meet

you, I hope our friendship will last long.

-- ...

For the third time already, I get the chills on my back.

The girl trustingly and brightly smiled, giving me a formal greeting. Too bad I can't shake her hand.

Wait, just one second... Is it me, or did I hear "he"?

*

-- Wait a second, you're a guy!!!

Shenanigans! Well, I did think that for fourteen year old girl her upper part is not too developed, but damn it, there below, indeed that thing is!..

-- A-ha-ha-ha-ha... It's not good, Ishizue-san, to become an attendant with dirty thoughts.

That black devil smiles innocently.

His face, whatever you say, was so incredibly charming... Even my breathing got faster, when I was changing his clothes.

It was a noon of a second day from the time I became a steward. I was randomly given this:

-- I'm hot. Ishizue-san, change my clothes.

He says that, and I'm thinking in excitement what will be next, and here..!

-- By the way... What's that? Chinese dress? Are you using it as pajamas?

I'm throwing a protest with a judging look, like, isn't it a waste?

-- It's just that my robe looks like that. Silk is for comfort. By the way, if I wear anything once, I don't wear it the second time.

Seriously?! Karyou Kaie is absolutely passive, not moving an inch.

... Damn, I'm blushing again, even though I do my best not to. While I was taking his clothes off, my head was spinning from the feeling of amorality. Undressing a beauty with no limbs. Feeling like that girl can't do anything to oppose it - girl doesn't resist, just bears the unceremonious guy, swallowing her embarrassment.

Feeling of guilt, resembling a play with a doll, shook my fingers, unbuttoning her clothes.

The naked body was so milky and delicate that I got uncomfortable about my own body, and I almost went mad from realizing that I can, here and now, turn into a criminal, when I saw the object around his crotch - how did I feel then, can anyone understand? Anyone? No one, I guess...

-- And that's it. No complaints? Nothing feels uncomfortable on your back?

-- Nothing, accurate work. You're gentle, Ishizue-san. And so agile with your hand.

-- Surely. Doing my best to move one in place of two.

I walk back from the bed, walk around the sofa... and black dog, while keeping some decent distance, and drop my bottom on the floor. Karyou Kaie is like swallowtail, giving off the poison while looking innocent, and if I was any closer than I am now, I would get a lethal dose of it. For things like that, you need to grow resistance and get used to it with time.

My casualty changed a lot. All the day I, basically, spend in Kaie's basement room, coming back home just to sleep. One time I got so lazy that I didn't feel like walking home, so I asked if I can spend a night there.

-- It's dangerous at night, you can't. And wasn't that you who said it's impossible to spend a whole day in a room like that? That you need to get some fresh air, at least at night?

And so, I wasn't allowed to stay.

The job is boringly easy. Food-related stuff, sometimes walks around the room on prostheses, talks with no real topic. Wiping the body is the only thing of concern, and care about the lower part...

-- Ishizue-san, give me that leg prosthesis.

... was decided like that. He toddles to the bathroom on his own.

The empty days kept coming and going, a month passed like nothing. Receiving my first salary, I got worried if I should actually take this much. Job is supposed

to be hard, and if it's so fun, I become afraid of some ancient misfortunes and get nervous.

Balance started crumbling - I noticed it myself. Careless lonesomeness in my room began invoking gloom. Small, but beloved home now didn't seem so wonderful. My ideal became like that: if you don't want anyone to disturb you, stay in that underground room. From the time I found out about it, this apartment became nothing more than a place to stay the night. When a rootless darkness appears on a ball in a palace, its own life begins to feel empty.

I switch on the TV and lie on my bed, in a stream of uninteresting news, remembering today's underground room.

-- Ishizue-san, you're not living up to your surname, "Stone staff".

"That pisses me off. Who does he think he is?!" - I think sometimes, seriously hating that spoiled boy. Well of course, I care about him in words and works, and he doesn't even care what I'll think.

-- I thought you're more cruel.

-- What?

-- You're kind, you care about me. Even though I'm defective, I feel human, that's how you are.

So he likes cold attitude? Damn masochist!

But I see the power I don't have in how Kaie doesn't care if he's treated like a thing, in how he acts decently without getting stuck on any words of others...

And why would you try being next to someone you didn't become, next to someone you're in awe with?.. Heh. You're probably waiting for a crumb to be spared for you, nothing new.

-- Damn, it's like tightrope walking. When balance is lost, you need to fix it in cold blood.

If you jerk to the wrong side - you fall. It's all right, I'll carefully return to my place. Both the feeling that I want to keep taking care of him for as long as I can, and that basement room I can't get off my mind - both are just a temporary poisoning.

Same as with a balancer. One month will pass, and the fever should cool down.

*

Well, that hopeful foresight was naive.

Complicating the illness, fever didn't cool down, it kept heating up. It's unpleasant to admit, but this is life. Once fortune turns away from you, it keeps going against you again and again.

*

-- Ah, yes. Ishizue-san, your house is in the north part of Shikura, right?

-- Yes, why? You want to go shopping?

-- I want to see with my own two eyes if you reach it. Ishizue-san, did you know?

A world of rock'n'roll has condescended to this hole!

Apparently in a nice mood, Kaie put on prostheses of legs and left hand today.

Probably that's why, for the first time, I saw his theatrical gesture.

-- What's that rock'n'roll? A fossil?

I close a comics book. He said he'll buy some books to kill time, so I bought him some comics books as well. Kaie doesn't read at all, so those books are permanently borrowed by me. I'm making plans to persuade him into buying "Sangokushi", but that's a secret.

-- Hey, why "fossil" now... That's a physical form of an object, which looks like a stone... Ishizue-san, do you not listen to music?

-- No. When I play myself, it's alright, but I don't like listening to others' music.

-- Hmm. So you don't know about rock'n'roll either. So anyway, youngsters from Shikura north say that you can get some drugs unavailable in pharmacies, for a decent price.

-- What?..

Suddenly. "Well, it doesn't matter though", the underground devil continues.

-- But yeah, it's not that cool. Black marketeer is doing his best, youngsters under twenty keep on raving. Dealers don't just sell drugs, they're extorting ones

that fail to pay the price, give them a showy lesson, they know their stuff. Looks like the guys that owe a lot are getting in car accidents. When it's a hit and run, you can't catch them, one detective I know complained to me about that.

-- ...

It doesn't concern me at all, but that story resembles the book I've just read.

-- Listen, I don't know. Is this going to end once they know that the business is just a cover? Want to dream - there, get triazolam, have it decent and dealt with, and you won't have too many permanent clients either, right? If you try to distribute it too much, you'll get caught, that's not fun.

-- Yeah. But the problem is, he isn't getting caught. Black marketeer, of course, doesn't show up himself, but all his cases are imitations. He's learning from the long-lasting and successfully-ending small dealers' cases and imitates them. So inspectors can't make out criminal's image.

-- ...

A weird topic.

Actually, who would know imitational crimes better than me?

Even still, if the criminal doesn't leave someone's image, you can't see his true face. His discerning feature is, no matter how laughable it is, lack of face.

-- Strange criminals. What are they trying to achieve by imitating?

-- Who knows. Well, not taking anyone's place at least. That's the deal anyway, I thought you know something, Ishizue-san. Your character is the one that easily catches on topics like that.

-- Come on. Do you think any black marketeer would come close to that building?

-- Oh.

Kaie got it. Heh, I live in building 13, the one that mothers scare their capricious children with. Famous with high danger and poverty levels. Well, I surprisingly like the topic, though.

-- Hmm? Having fun, Ishizue-san? You know something after all?

-- Nope, I honestly don't. But just now... You were worried about me, right?

That was like a warning - "don't get caught up in it".

Kaie didn't move an eyebrow:

-- Why? I'm interested in criminals-copycats. What happens to you is none of my concern.

Black dog barked.

Nevertheless, the days were busy.

Five months passed from since I got discharged from that clinic. "Maybe this year will end in favorable winds as well", I'm thinking optimistically, on the way home. The guy in the basement was, as usual, indifferent to my fate, and lately I'm thinking that it's alright. If it gets too hard to bear, I'll make him obey with power.

-- Oh hi, Arika-chan.

Niijima-chan was waiting for me near the door. "Ding!" - reacts, in my head, the lately relaxed radar.

-- Something happened?

-- Someone was in your room until recently. You don't come back until seven, right? I thought it's strange, so I went to look, and some strange boy came out of it. He said he knows you from the clinic, and that I shouldn't worry, and went his way.

-- Wh-what?.. That's it? Nothing else happened?

-- I'm telling you, no. But it's the first time I saw anyone come for you, Arika-chan.

Of course. I didn't say I got discharged to any of my acquaintances. I thank Niijima-chan and go in.

-- Damn. What for, why? I don't get it.

The room was a fine example of an apartment after a search.

Bed and TV are untouched, so I sit on the bed and think, who it might've been. I can't think of anyone, of course. I decide to change the door lock first thing in the morning tomorrow.

*

-- You don't get why? That's some stuff. I keep on hearing it today.

Next day, 2 PM. Door stuff took some time, so I came late for work.

You won't get satiated from just juice; I cut an apple for Kaie, and eat some grape myself. Single-handed apple cutting is a trick I learned especially for Kaie.

-- Listen, I'm serious. Yesterday I came home, and it was all turned upside down. And I didn't do anything at all that would make me any enemies after discharge. I'm consulting with him, what could that mean?..

"A-ahn" - Kaie opens his mouth. I carefully feed him apple slice. Left hand prosthesis lays on a table, but looks like he doesn't feel like wearing it today.

-- Hmm, maybe just a burglar?

-- Nothing was stolen. I prefer to carry my paybook with me.

And I carry all my money with me. If anyone sees my profit, I'm done for.

-- Well, there's no meaning to think about it, I guess. You don't remember what happened that day? And you don't know what you did yesterday, right?

-- Well... something like that.

But... Hey, did I really say that to Kaie?

-- Thanks, you can clean up now.

I take the tray and go to the sink.

As there is no kitchen in this room, I have to wash dishes in toilet room. Water reservoir is cubic and this room is, too. Square walls have different doors in them - near the one leading to forest is the toilet, without a door. All doors, except the south one, are mysterious and locked.

-- Oh... Why are there two cups in the sink?

Why, do I need to ask why?

Today, before I came, he had a guest.

-- He-ey. Did anyone come? - I shout, washing the fruit knife and plate.

-- What? But you introduced me to him yourself. He said he needs help and wants, no matter what, to ask me something...

I shut off water, drop the fruit knife in my pocket, and as naturally as I can return to the room.

-- What was he like? So that I can remember him.

-- A bit younger than me... His name was Hisaori Shinya.

-- Hisaori... Shinya?

-- You know him?

Of course I do. How can I not..

But why him?

Was he discharged already?

-- He's sudden, as usual... And? What were we talking about?

-- Well, the hot topic. He wants revenge against his sister... You know how he was caught?

-- I heard about it.

Hisaori Shinya. High-schooler, left parents to die and tried to kill his sister.

Well, all that was three years ago, he should be in clinic now. But if he managed to leave the clinic, then he probably cut his eye-teeth, and he wouldn't think about revenge.

-- And what you did, Kaie?

-- Whatever I said, my words didn't reach him at all. You know it, right? The rumor people made up. If you want to kill a possessed, ask a demon from the forest. That's about me. Hisaori-san, sadly, took it seriously.

The fish is running about above the ceiling.

Black dog snuffles loudly.

It's the first time I hear about a rumor like that. Yeah, if it's that guy, he might take a rumor like that seriously.

-- I see. So Shinya's older sister is possessed. And he decided to carry out revenge for sure... What did you suggest?

-- To dig a hole for someone more carefully, nothing more. Hisaori Shinya has both legs and arms, I can't even offer a hand prosthesis. I asked how he wants to have his revenge, he replied that he wants to kill, of course.

-- Bark, bark! - black dog, never once coming close to me, rubs against my leg.

-- Good grief... At what time did he come?

-- About an hour before you came.

We know each other. I can't leave such a dangerous guy alone.

-- I'm sorry, but is it okay if I leave early today? I have to catch Hisaori Shinya.

But will it be alright? If it comes to a fight, I can't do much with one hand...

-- Okay. Wait. You can take the prosthesis from the table. As you don't have your own feelings yet, you can only use this one.

I don't get it. Prosthesis for left hand, the one at the table?..

-- Take it, don't be shy. *You wanted a hand prosthesis from the very beginning, didn't you.*

-- Ah. Yeah... Okay, I'll take it then. Why would I need it, though...

I can't refuse after those words from him.

Taking the white left hand that I don't even want to touch, that won't even fit me, I leave the basement room.

*

I knew where to search, to say it straight.

If nothing changed in three years, Hisaori Shinya's house is a land tenure in Nozu. Returning to the station, I take a bus to Nozu. For the first time since my discharge I go there, and I don't feel like showing myself too much. In the bus, I decide to put on the prosthesis lent by Kaie. It's made to match him perfectly. I tried not to think about it, but I know this prosthesis is "wonderful", no tricks. I just had to put white artificial arm close to me for it to grow in perfectly. It's not moving, of course... "Wonderful" part in it is that Kaie can move it, *like a god*.

-- Seriously, what's the trick?.. - I mumble, as the bus keeps going.

Soon I arrive to Nozu. Day is closing to dusk, and one of the Shikura city's horrors, illusionary high-rise building, jerks with red light.

Hisaori - building 3, room 303.

No nameplate. Looks like no new family went in. An apartment left after possessed, who's gonna use it...

Opening the door, I enter. I don't want him to run away, so I squeezed in without ringing the bell on the door, but inside was completely empty. Houses in Nozu are 3LDK, so it was a bit tight here, but it was just about right size for a mother, a father, a sister and a brother to live together.

The sun sets. I look at the balcony from the empty living room.

Is that so...

If he's not here, I don't know how to find him. I don't want to, but I'll have to, when I go back, to call clinic and ask the staff about his discharge.

X X X

The moment was so perfect, it's like it was asked for.

It was tenth hour in the evening. I came back from Nozu and was in front of building 13, when the back of my head suddenly got hit with a blunt object.

I see sparks in my eyes.

I didn't lose consciousness, but I almost fell face down.

Without any time to collect myself, I get kicked in my back and fall to the ground.

-- Hey, you're Ishizue Arika?

Someone grabs my head and drags me into darkness. What the hell?..

Residential home is in front of me, isn't anyone coming for help?!

-- Weh? Is that the guy?! What the fuck, he's weaker than us! He's the one chasing us to the corner?!

More sparks. I think my head was kicked from the side. I can't deal with the situation anymore. More than three, but less than six kids push me to a big tree.

-- Hey, you're alive? You're alive, right? Well, I don't care though... Ta-kun, can I hit him too?

-- Why not? See, he's not bleeding. Just don't hit his face, if you hit it too strong, he's gonna kick the bucket.

They laugh.

Dam-m'! - I get a loud hit to the back of my head. She probably hit me with a swing, like playing golf.

-- Are you stupid or what?! The back of the head is the vital... Yuck, blood! Stop it, he's gonna kick in like that.

-- So what if he dies? He's useless anyway.

-- Ahh, right! He's possessed, he's fine without a head too.

And the lynching begins.

My hands bent, I turn into a sandbag that's also verbally abused. From all the incoming hits I start getting interruptions in my consciousness, I don't see the

faces anymore, I don't understand the words.

-- Ah!

Left hand, the prosthesis, moves. Blood richly flows into it.

-- What?... Ta-kun, what's with your hand?

She started yelling right after the question.

Oh come on, what's with that infamy? Right in front of my eyes, a residential house, and no one came out to help.

Anger, resentment about some weakling counter striking, attacking with a crowd. It's breached with an overwhelming difference in power, creating defiance, abuse, groans and grinding teeth.

-- Ayeeeeeeee... no... I-I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry-y!..

The pleads of the last woman, around my age, cause me to burst in laughter.

I admit, I really don't like using brute force.

But sadism after masochism is very, very nice...

*

-- Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha!

I barely content my laughter.

Five youngsters.. or six? - lie on the ground. They're soaked in blood, but they're fine.

-- Oh damn! Well, but they're still alive?

Ha-ha-ha. A slight regret.

What's that... I started a new life at last, I wanted to live as a normal human, and it wasn't long before I crossed the border of allowed self-defense. Ha-ha-ha! I should be more careful here, or they'll take me back to clinic. But it was fun, so fun, I can't do anything about it. Yes, yes! To put a human in this mental state to a clinic is a crime. And they're the ones responsible, too.

-- Hey, Ta-kun. Want an ambulance? No? Weird guy. You're wheezing something, can't understand ya.

If you leave them like that, two are probably going to die, but someone's going to pass by soon anyway. The frivolity that made them attack on the roadside

became a straw that would save those Ta-kuns.

-- That's great. If even one of you died, and this whole thing made it to public, I would have to lie low. And like that, we both are lucky.

Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha! What a shame, I can't control my face expression because of the excess happiness. Well, what am I standing here for, I'd better go home.

X X X

-- Hi-hi, my home, I'm back!

Even though I got into some trouble on the way here, I made it alright from Nozu.

I take off the dirtied clothes, switch TV on and fall on the bed.

The news stream makes me refuse to believe my ears.

-- Wha-a-at?!

I jump up and look at the screen. It wasn't my imagination.

Perpetually announcing news from another world speaker names familiar places and names.

"Today, at around six o'clock, in the industrial area of Nozu in Shikura city, in a residential array, a body of a young man was found, identified as Hisaori Shinya, nineteen years old, living in the said place. By the words of witnesses and Hisaori's notes, accused with his death is a man named ***. He was seen there at the time of...."

-- What the hell!

My mind gets empty this time.

I come back to senses from the border of consciousness:

-- Why is it me who killed him?

The name of a man accused of killing Hisaori Shinya was none other but my own.



Illustration / こやまひろかず (TYPE-MOON)

2.

HandS.(L)



disconnection

isorder

Written by Kinoko Nasu
Illustrated by Koyama Hirokazu
(TYPE MOON)



Decorative
DD D
Disconnection
Disorder
Hands

「ああ、^{それ}歡喜^ははしばらく貸してあげるよ。
これからの君は厳しそうだし。

頼りになる手は、いくつあっても足りないでしょ？」

「いいの？ 永遠に返しに來ないよ？」

Whatever I did, nothing worked out well.

An ideal girl though, judging by her grades. Role model student, if you look at it that way.

Everyone around me was so scared of me they wished me death. I know, why. Because whatever I finished doing, the finish was different from other kids. From a casual walk to corner store to talks with parents. From school stuff to healthcare. I couldn't stop if things didn't seem to work out the best I could think of. And every time, my parents were disappointed in me, but I succeeded, and they were saying "well done". That's how everything was ending.

Restoration, of course, was successful and failed.

Getting results in my own way, I made many suffer at the same time.

No one blames me, because pros are overrated. But sometime this relation is going to turn around.

But I didn't know any other ways. My dad was scolding me: "Don't do anything". I was completely weird. My mother admitted that I'm a pain in the ass. I couldn't correct myself.

Desperate, I was depressed and couldn't even go out. Even the way I was holding the spoon was scary.

But once my mother taught me - if I'm afraid of my actions, I should just completely copy someone else's, and I'll do just fine.

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And so...

In the end, I didn't know how to stop myself.

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-- Ishizue Arika-san, my congratulations. Investigation showed you are latent. Your healing course as an agonist syndrome carrier is over. It was nice making your acquaintance for those past half a year.

Half a year after clinic, July 2003.

ECG, pulse, ABP, and also cerebral membrane of inner nerve and other insides of mine were rated and accounted; my innocence - proven. And only Mato-san, glaring at me from the other side of the glass door, was unhappy.

-- Thank you very much. Can I now get discharged with my conscience clear?

-- No, Ishizue-san, you were wounded by a syndrome carrier, we're going on to next procedures. We would be examining you just like before, but we'll transfer you to a normal chamber...

Looks like "Not possessed - discharge then" doesn't work here. Evil Tomato nods in satisfaction. I was bearing with it for so long, I'm good at that, but Mato-san is even better at pressuring, and that's the crossing line.

What kind of human she is, tormenting me like that?

-- Doctor Mato should've told you the details. Well, here's your new schedule... Your case, Ishizue-san, is new for us, and we want to deal with the procedures especially carefully.

Building A's personnel consists of a decent amount of real doctors. This one, quite friendly, put some documents, resembling a contract, in front of me.

-- Ah, sign right here, right...

...With a pen in my hand, I freeze, seeing my new schedule. Half a day takes going through doctor's rooms from top to bottom of building A. Second half - talk with other patients, keep yourself in shape, and that finishes with a romantic, psychologic, high-class examination by doctor Touma herself, which I naively believed was last today.

-- Pardon me, a question. What's with all the service in this clinic?

Am I not the one to be served, being a patient?

-- You see, thing is, even though you're mentally injured, you're still a healthy

man, right? That's why, as a part of rehabilitation into society, this way of curing is also effective.

Well-well. Live in one room with clinic's patients, talk to them, walk with them, work till seventh sweat, and rehabilitate on the way. So it seems. They don't care about my safety - their top priority is immediate results. Or it won't make sense for me to risk my life.

-- Do I have the right to refuse in some particular cases?

-- Well... Actually, doctor Touma asked to tell you, it's not voluntary job, it's a system.

This human is pitiful, so confused. By the way, most lethal cases in this clinic were not brought failed surgeries, they were brought by aggression explosions caused by awkward communication of patients.

-- Gotcha. By the way, doctor. I want to just confirm, this service is voluntary, right?

-- Yes, in a sense. You could maybe call it "loyalty" or "junshi¹".

Got it. Looks like it will take long before discharge.

I mean, I can't get out alive because of Mato-san's beliefs, getting out dead - sure, possibly tomorrow, 50/50 chance... Meaning - abandon all hope...

After meditating a bit, I left the chamber and met Mato-san, waiting for me. She had no white coat - leaving now, I guess.

-- Shozai. Let me tell you from the start - nothing's voluntary.

-- ... Leaking private conversations. Okay, okay, got it, it's forced.

-- Yup. While you have a role, I'll treat you as a human. Well, it's okay not to get too embarked in your job - you're such a silly head you'll go dancing on a minefield. Well, see ya - until next week, - Evil Tomato bids me goodbye.

And so I note down - "careful, next week brings despair". Nevertheless, I still got a freedom to walk around the building, so first thing first I went to Dr.Dolittle's confessional. Dr. Dolittle, also called Dr. Roman, also called just Kinui, is always siding with patients that are bothered by anything.

-- There's nothing to be so desperate about. I think, you should instead build up hope. In your case, Arika-kun, your sister was sent to building D, so clinic can't

just discharge you saying "no problems", even if you're latent. Even that decision was made in half a year, only because Dr. Touma gave it all her effort.

-- Well, yeah. Quoting Mato-san: "Good for you, even if you're pressured till half-death, you'll forget everything at night.", so it's right.

So I guess she happily put her efforts on all sides.

Medical expert Touma Mato, nicknamed Mato-san. When my possessed sister started raging about, she got her tied up before everyone around could suffer.

Saved my life.

Later I found out she's a medical expert-police inspector, public safety elite, ordered to inspect A-syndrome carriers. Hardworking woman, often shows up in clinic and inspects patients, sometimes drags in new ones.

-- Ah yeah... Arika-kun, your memory doesn't hold daily events through night, right? Can you please tell me, at what hour do they disappear?

-- At morning, and surprisingly, it depends on my mood. Well, at average, I lose memory from half till nine A.M. to six P.M., and if I don't watch the time, I forget everything when sun sets.

And the opposite, I can remember events from evening till morning. It's important to know that, so I can live with it somehow. Write down important stuff that happened during the day, read the notes at night, and that's it. But since I'm just writing down text, every image-depending information is a bit inaccurate.

-- What a mess. From one side, your frustrations are erased, but you can live with no problems. So that's why Touma doesn't want to let you out. Touma, you want to heal Arika-kun's injured memory, right?

-- Not re-eally. I'm just tired with all that torturing.

-- I won't believe that. Arika-kun, do you think she's tired with torturing?

A warning smile... so I got to know the unpleasant truth.

-- Gotcha, I was stupid. By the way, Doc. If I get free time tomorrow, is there anything for me to do?

-- Read a book... no, reading's not for you. Meaningless to read during the day, you'll forget it anyway. If you're going to read, do it at night.

-- Yeah. But somehow that's a great fortune.

-- Then maybe you'll paint during the day? Everything will be left on the canvas. Then resume painting, shouldn't be so hard.

-- Well, that's right too. Is it fun to paint?

-- The more serious you are about it, the more of a headache it becomes. Arikakun, didn't you draw anything as a kid?

Dolittle brings dusty painting utils.

Oh yeah. I remember drawing some squiggles some time ago. Not for getting praised, not to show it to anyone, I was just playing with a paintbrush. Can you avoid unpleasant recollections if you don't have any goal to begin with?

In waiting room of building B is an atelier, chessboard. The only fine place in the clinic with a view to an inner garden. And so, I was moving my paintbrush here and there, when an interesting person talked to me.

-- Sorry, you don't mind if I stick around?

-- Hm?

The person introduced to me as Hisaori Shinya, sat on the floor and kept looking at me with a nitpicking glare. Like a critter that met a human for the first time in its life, keeping watch of my every movement with shimmering eyes.

Full of hellish miasmas, that person didn't seem to have any evil intentions, so I started talking in a relaxed manner.

-- Is it possible to be so agile at handling everything with one hand?

-- I don't have the other one, so I'm doing my best.

I giggled, and so did Hisaori. Hisaori appeared to be quite a normal person, talked to me about stuff with no particular topic, and so became my friend.

I remembered clearly how Hisaori liked my hand. I don't have left one, so I only have right one left. And Hisaori kept on watching it, probably because...

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-- Hi there, Ishizue-san. Shogi today?

-- ?..

Half a year passed, and there - 2003, beginning.

After getting in a boring mess in a clinic, I had my discharge delayed until summer. And now an unfamiliar patient appears before me.

-- Are you alright? It's me, Hisaori.

Hisaori?... Ah, right, according to my notes, this person before me looks like Hisaori Shinya, whom I only met during day, so I have no image recollections of. I believed it's the case, because I textually noted all body features. Hair length, height, build, and gender... My recognition was delayed, because the Hisaori in front of me has changed drastically, getting a new feature.

-- What's with you? Did you fall?

-- Ah, that? That's after surgery. Everything was bad there from long ago, so I just told them to amputate it.

A single-handed patient, just like me. From this day on, Hisaori doesn't have a right hand.

We talked for a while. Music sounds, personal time is over, Hisaori says goodbye and leaves.

-- Ooh. Hi, Arika-kun.

At that moment, Doctor Dolittle greets me, passing by at the same moment.

A great guy, answers anything you ask him.

-- Hey Doc. Is Hisaori already getting discharged?

-- Yeah. Just like you, Arika-kun, Hisaori is on good accounting, so discharge is half a year early. Well, we had to discharge someone this month. If you behaved, we would've discharged you now.

-- Ha-ha-ha. Yeah, Mato-san was raging about. And it looks like I'm going to isolator tomorrow again... But tell me, what are Hisaori-san's symptoms? Even though Hisaori is from C building, I didn't notice anything out of ordinary...

-- Hisaori-san's modification is quite rare. Appearance is changed, but at the same time you can't see the symptoms. Get what I mean?

I raise my hands - not at all. You can see it, but can't see it - what's with this weird puzzle? Actually, to be honest, I wasn't interested in Hisaori's symptoms.

-- Face expression. Inside Hisaori-san's face, nerve cells, muscles, fibers can become something completely different. Hisaori-san can, on own will, change face expression to match some image.

-- What? But that's usual. If you get angry - your face gets angry.

-- Yeah... You don't really smile when angry. But Hisaori-san is something different. Hisaori-san makes sad face when angry, and can copy your manner to look lifeless as well.

-- Hmm... What a weird modification. Why are you bothering with cure anyway, can't you just discharge Hisaori right away? There's nothing dangerous about it.

-- Well, that depends. To one living being that power is not much, but that's quite a talent in a society, don't you think? Even though it's hard to find analogy.

I guess what we're talking about is how fake smile that doesn't look fake is scary stuff. Maybe Dolittle once met some wedding swindlers?

-- Well, let's leave the modifications aside. What made Hisaori possessed?

I'm asking the main question right away. That is what interests me, and however normal Hisaori can look, if one is here - one was definitely broken once.

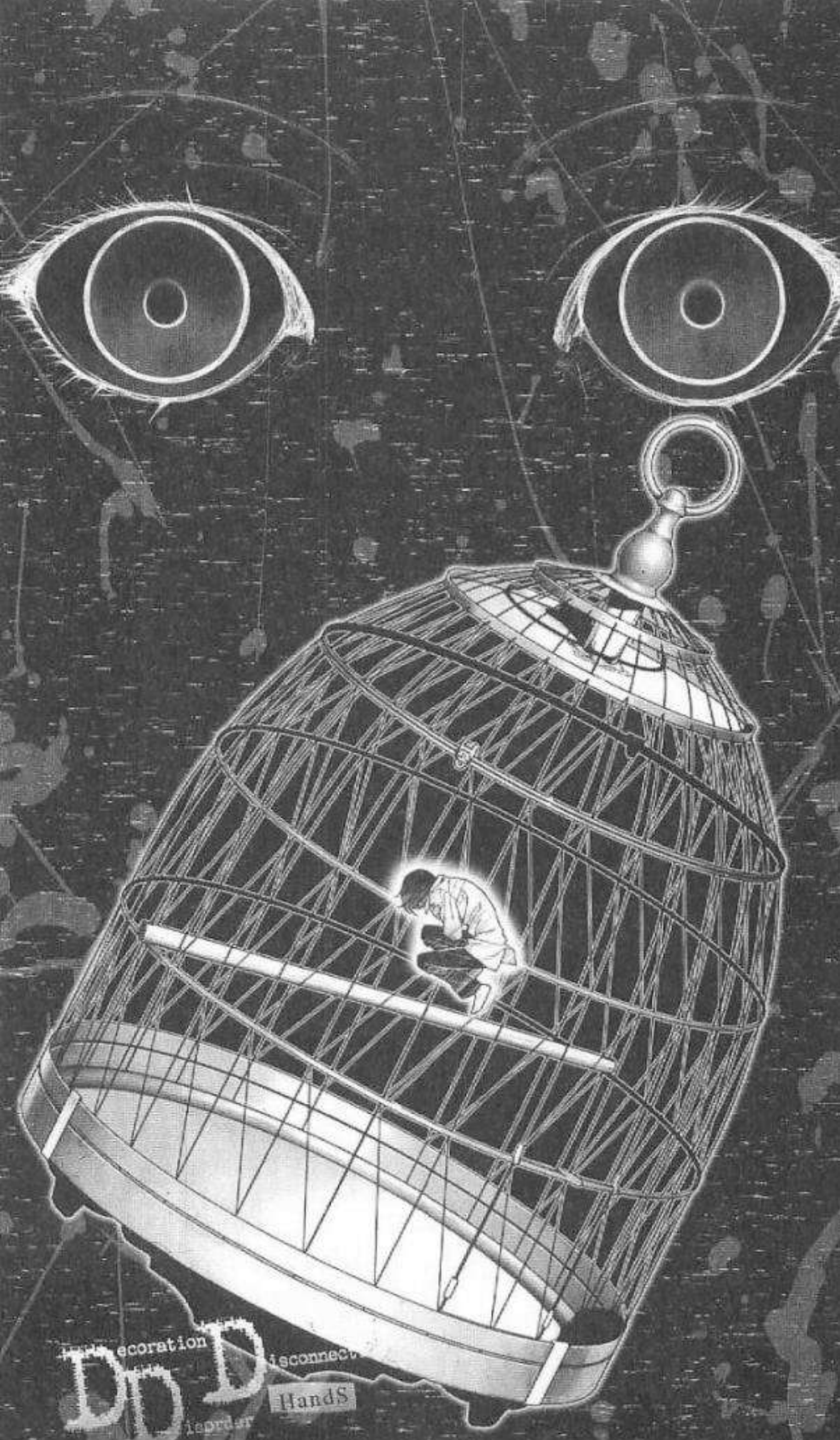
-- It's a relation of an unusual degree. Hisaori-san can't have a goal in life. Lost the power to objectively judge oneself - that would be more accurate. Can't even walk without copying anyone.

-- Hmm... Is that even right place to cure that? Shouldn't Hisaori be sent to psychiatric clinic before our purgatory?

-- No-no, the problem, of course, is there, but that doesn't mean Hisaori-san becomes the copied human. In the end, Hisaori Makina just takes someone else's life into account, so everything works out well.

-- And then, Arika-kun. In the facility you mentioned is her younger brother, Hisaori Shinya..





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Beginning of 2004.

Three years after being forced into a psychiatric hospital, cured with a 2.5 year long psychiatric course, Hisaori Shinya, in the age of 19, was put into accounting of defense forces, but recognized as socially rehabilitated.

Relatives agreed to accept Hisaori Shinya. Note - coincidentally, his older sister, Hisaori Makina, was discharged from Origa clinic around the same time. No relatives agreed to shelter her, so she made home at municipal welfare organization of Shikura town.

Hisaori Shinya was officially recognized as role model patient both by doctor in charge and by inspectors in charge, his mental and physical condition as best, and the doctor that knew of his condition at the time events took place was applauding to the three year effort of the hospital.

Nevertheless, even the cured Hisaori Shinya's statements about the case remain vague. At that time, his position was that Hisaori Makina was the criminal, and he was the victim, but after a couple of days, after Hisaori Makina was found an A-syndrome carrier, he recognized his mistake, and here's the current version.

He didn't talk about his sister, Hisaori Makina, after that, but two year long court examination announced the Hisaori family case an accident.

Half a year after discharge from health center, Hisaori Shinya was found dead in a room in Nozu industrial area.

Cause of death - blood loss from a lacerated neck wound.

Three years passed from the time he lost parents and pushed his sister from the third floor's balcony. What he was thinking and what he was fearing, no one can know anymore.

Except...

Except the one, whom he half a day earlier, in an underground room, told his story.

"I'll tell you about my sister, will you listen?"

Not even once I thought of my sister as of a human. Now I have a reason, but while I was a child it was strange, confusing. Even though my sister was so perfect, so ideal, why was she so disgusting to me?.."

Saying that question, with a peaceful look he started his story.

1

My sister wraps, and I pull out.

These are in kanji of our names, and my mother was saying that my name - Shinya - was born from my sister.

Makina and Shinya. My parents wished we'd become a harmonic brother and sister. I wished so too, but my sister wasn't the type who could understand that human feeling.

A seed of talent ripens only if environment grows it properly. If you give modern weapons to barbarians, things will only get worse, just as our peaceful family didn't need a god. Hisaori Makina was a heavenly punishment for our house.

"Hey, Shinya, your sister wants to be alone sometimes, right? Tell about that to mom and dad. While it's still possible to fix anything..."

Every time we went to play outside, my mother secretly whispered that to my ear. Maybe because she was reminding me of that so much, I have that in my primary memory now. Since I only just entered conscious age, I always just tilted my head and didn't understand what she meant at all. And at the same time I loved my sister, and I was envious that everyone was so nice to her everywhere. I remember my frustration at mother. My sister was so loved, everyone in the area was greeting her. Why does she look at my sister with that alienated look?

"... Yeah. Shinya-kun, you're Makina-chan's brother..."

Situation started to change when I started going to school.

I was in the second grade, and my homeroom teacher picked me out only because I was Makina's brother. He was her homeroom teacher last year. Makina wasn't a very diligent student year ago, and didn't have much interest in study.

"Well, you just have to memorize that. Just a game, why would I be stubborn."

Makina didn't have anything of a kid, and a teacher didn't have anything of an adult. She thought of games and studies as of something silly, so teacher answered - memorize it all, or I won't let you in class. Next couple days Makina didn't leave her room. We lived in a same room with sister before middle school, so I knew what was happening. Day and night she was on the two-story bed, "memorizing", just like teacher said.

After some three days Makina came back to class, after memorizing by heart every second year textbook. But that wasn't the end of it - she externally passed to next grade, raining information about authority and homeroom teacher's common sense, and finally stopped at sixth year subjects. Why? Because junior student couldn't get further graded textbooks.

Teacher made two mistakes. He gave Makina a goal; he told her that studying is memorizing. It was probably fortunate that around her were second graders - they didn't understand what mad mess was Makina making. A girl that can study everything in one day - that's it. Really fortunate. A year later, she would be compared to me.

For a year, the teacher was doing his best trying to make Makina a student. After some time, he could not bear it any longer, and was forced to come to us.

"Your daughter is an incredibly talented student. Our school is not a place for her. I would recommend her to a more advanced facility", and so on. If we transfer her, he'll write a recommendation, but the school wouldn't bother looking for the 'more advanced facility'... And it became clear that at school everyone also understood how strange Makina is. It would be fine with a simply "talented" student, but transferring someone lacking in the sense of humanity itself would make it their responsibility. The transfer has to be done by Hisaori family's will alone. But dad was always responding with this line:

-- Different school means constant trips somewhere far, we don't have money for

that. Our Makina is fine where she is now.

And so the lion Makina kept visiting the little kitten society.

Yes... Surely after that experience with my sister, of course he picked me out. By the way, after that teacher heard a rumor about me getting alienated from my class, he left school right away. He was a good guy, was coming to work on a cool car. By the end he was riding some miserable junk, students were laughing at him, and he shut himself in his own world. After that, I remember, my dad saw a newspaper, made an awkward face and mumbled something about suicide and rope. Upperclassmen were saying as a matter of course: "Because Makina took a dislike to him".

... Even though I don't want to think about it... someone of Makina's henchmen irresponsibly threw in something like, you have to get rid of your enemies.

Only after that case I understood why was my mother saying what she was saying back then. Human without some base knowledge of some area wouldn't know what's happening in it. A great innovative engine wouldn't impress ones that see cars simply as movement devices. To understand Makina's actions, you would need at least a tiny bit of her intelligence.

You can laugh at my bragging now, but I got to be the best in my class now too, and I understood that I'm above average level. Yeah, I had best grades until the first year of high school, I was quite talented. But I didn't have the time to feel my superiority. Fortunate or unfortunate, I didn't get to.

So to say, I felt like an imp living next to Satan.

If I'm not careful, my self-confidence and everything else along will be crushed.

That's all from my younger years, and that's how Hisaori Makina was.

Makina was amazing adults, whatever she was said to do. God's child, genius, there was no one in Nozu that didn't know her. But if you look closer - she's doing everything without putting any effort, but still she comes far further than anyone, so normal people decide to ignore it. You mustn't look at the sun directly.

-- Sis, you're not seriously trying hard, right?

-- Nope. Or else I'll become completely alone.

One day before vacation, I sent a question to the direction of second story of the bed, and got my answer. Weird answer. Makina doesn't understand herself,

what's that "I'll become completely alone"? She's been completely alone for a while now, she just didn't notice it.

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With every passing Makina's school year, parents were harder and harder too look at. Even I understood that. They're praising her in words, but their faces say "we don't need you, you're just a bother". That isn't strange. Makina succeeds in one thing, but makes others lose many other things. Money, for example. Makina gets highest grades in Shikura, but she consumed whole family budget. If she starts learning, she requires endless amount of material. She's buying books here and there, memorizes them, and burns the ones she read for some reason. Budget is literally vaporizing because of her. Like a poor man riding limousine. She was both parents' pride and cause of the beggarly life with no money. But at the same time Makina was an unrivaled role model student, so parents couldn't scold her. While treating her like a painful corn, they desperately played love with the daughter. How heinous. Both parents, humiliating themselves before a fifth grader, and the sister, who believed their tormented smiles. She really doesn't understand anything concerning herself. There was nothing she couldn't do, neither at home nor at school. If you say school's role is to teach how to teach oneself, mother's role is to do housework, and father's role is to get money - she didn't need any of them anymore.

I think she did everything herself. It was different when she was a child. Any talented child is still bound by conventions of society. We were calming ourselves down, saying to ourselves that she's a child, but still we were afraid of the fact that she's less and less of a child every year. She was unrivaled, but she didn't have any allies.

And still, Makina was a great older sister. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't catch up with her; no matter how hard I studied, my good grades faded in comparison; it was an amazing barrier. Like a complex cancer case, always reigning my mind.

Not even once I thought of my sister as of a human. She's like a god. She's inspiring amazement with her perfection and thrill with her power. Gods are something like this, right?

But one summer, when Makina was in fifth grade... My goddess suddenly went crazy.

"Dad, look, a ghost!.."

In the white of day, Makina calls dad. Tired dad doesn't react to her call, me and mother don't hurry to her side either.

Because the whole family is tired of Makina by now.

"Burning, burning! Black, like ash, black, like ash..."

Makina's interested voice at the balcony is calm. Maybe she's just joking, maybe it's just her imagination. Her tone of voice tells that it's not necessary to run to her side, a girlish, cute voice.

Oh, and by the way... Makina only talked in this voice at that one time.

Sometimes I get tormented by a thought - what if that was a desperate scream, the first time Makina ever asked her family for help? Because if dad pulled her back from balcony then, saved her... Sister always went the wrong path, but never did misstep, and here...

Makina was on the balcony until sunset, and then mother took her back to her room. The next day, during breakfast, Makina, as usual, smiled to mom and dad, saw the awkward fake smiles in return and yelped a little.

-- He-e...

Unwillingly, I smiled too. Funny. She can do anything, but she only just noticed that.

And so Makina became a comedy hero.

Realizing everyone's hate to her, she started trying so hard, like it was a matter of life and death. She tried to return to the former world, world she saw before.

Doing everything in her usual way, showing off her genius, she was throwing herself on everyone - come on, be friends with me! It was already getting extreme and becoming a tragedy. She comes in to play with you when you're alone, with no previous arrangements, gives you what she likes herself, forcefully finds and

solves your problems. She'll also tell you about your faults and characteristics, all in details. Her acquaintances were more and more afraid of her, but Makina didn't mind that and kept on dashing at a breakneck pace.

She wanted to show herself a nice girl before neighbors. She was sucking up not just to her fellows, but to their parents as well. Makina kept on doing that in the scale of whole school, whole street blocks. Once decided, she didn't know any other ways... And she was getting the opposite result. Like a dancing doll with head on fire. If you wanted to make friends, you shouldn't have been so forceful. We were accepting complaints at a regular basis, like eating rice or drinking tea. Do something with your girl, please. She's weird. Every time Makina heard those complaints through her mother, she became more and more desperate. As usual, she brought her method to a dead point.

-- I've had enough!.. Are you loony?! Stop fooling in front of adults!..

Mother broke. Yeah, it was her who kept getting into the hurricanes Makina created, and then...

-- A, ah... Da, daddy, I, I...

... Makina clung to dad.

Dad was even more disappointed in her, than mom:

-- Makina. Be at home now. Bad girl like you shouldn't do anything.

My sister was no longer called Makina. Fake smiles erased from parents' faces, it was, to say, the only thing Makina succeeded in doing with her way. Dad stopped bringing her daughter to administration house, mother, who didn't look at me before, started being happy with her son's - usual - success, and only my name was leaving her mouth.

Even at school Makina was treated like an empty place. From first and to sixth grade she was ignored, like she was invisible. It could happen to me too, but I made a victim out of myself and avoided that fate. That sad truth. I was always blinded by Makina's shine, do I have to be on her side now? And everyone thought the same, probably. Let her be like that, a child.

Four years, from since Makina got in middle school, were the best years of my life.

She was moved to a different room, used before as a storage room, and the big room, where we lived together before, was just mine now.

Around the same time, Makina became lifeless, kept looking down at the floor, was quiet like a ghost. When mom or dad tried talking to her, she yelped.

Sometimes she looked in my direction with a lonely look, but I answered that with a fixed stare, and she fled to her room right away. Makina's life collapsed. Everything around her was scary, she came to a dead end which she couldn't get out from alone.

-- O-oh... Isn't there anything to do with Makina? Shinya, can't you save her? You're her brother after all.

-- I don't feel like it. Mom, don't push it on me when you're lazy to do so yourself. Ah right, about food, maybe she should eat alone in her room? Dad would be happy, and coming to call her for dinner everyday is a bother.

Makina would gloomily sit in a corner of her room, like a ghost, it isn't right, but who cares.

Makina forgot how to do anything, and the former wunderkind became a shame of Hisaori family. Of course, I had to do with it a too. Getting to the same middle school, I was studying as hard as I could. Because of that, powerless Makina was compared to me, and even at school they didn't leave her alone. Makina fled to my classroom a lot of times, but I fixed my stare at her and she ran away again. Everyone kept their distance from her at school, and at other places, but I didn't really keep watch of it. I didn't really have to know of those places anyway, I didn't solve her problems and I didn't tell parents about it.

And so, Makina was ostracized from society.

-- O-oh... finally...

... Managed to lock down a beast.

Yes. I was always afraid. Just as I was in awe, in the depths of my soul I wished for her to be gone, and couldn't do anything about it...

In high school, Makina kept skipping classes from the first semester, and

stopped going there at all before summer vacation. Closed in a dark room, she only showed up for dinner. Last stage. Makina, day after day losing her abilities, couldn't even talk normally anymore.

Like a newborn child. She could forget how to breathe like that. So it happened that mom was taking care of her, she even talked to father about placing her to an orphanage. Of course, father's answer was the same: "We don't have money for that. Deal with it yourself".

I had exams to do, mother was losing last drops of her love to Makina, who became a topic for local rumors. Makina's care was getting close to the bottom line. Mother kept on saying, as if trying to convince herself, that Hisaori family only has one child, Shinya, and kept on taking care of me.

For half a year, until I graduated, Makina was left alone for herself in her dark room... And I foolishly let that relax me. Of course, graduation ceremony was partly at fault, but I was naive myself. And once I thought *that* was a goddess, even though with a stretch. How could I think that Makina won't say anything again, how could I think I'm her level...

-- And so, Shinya. Teacher decided to move you two to same class.

-- Wha-a-at?

Makina shuddered.

Before the holiday table, for the first time in six years, mother put her fake smile on.

-- Why's so? What are you talking about? Does sister still want to attend school?

Makina, who didn't go to school for a whole year, probably couldn't pass to next grade. Mother, who thought of her as of a bother, but still pricing the parental duty, thought that she wants her daughter to graduate from school, so she signed her up for a second year.

-- What's so bad in that? With you, Shinya, even she could go to school.

So said the father, who didn't understand anything, but tried to make it look like he did. Putting an older sister on a second year with her younger brother? What nonsense. Father, teachers alike - are they idiots or what? It's not the way to deal with it now...

-- What the hell, not funny! I'm not going to nurse her. [x]

If I just refused that straight, instead of saying anything about nursing...

No, not like that...

-- M-m... aw.

If at that moment Makina didn't drop her spoon, everything would be alright.

-- Pick it up, Makina. You dropped it. What? Don't be silent, we're not clairvoyant. Or you don't hear me?

You dropped a spoon? Mother says, pick it up yourself.

Listening to mother's order, Makina slowly picked up the spoon. Dad pretended not to look. Makina lonely looks at mother with a spoon in her hand.

-- M... Mommy, feed me.

Bang - atmosphere at the table breaks.. Makina can't even eat by herself.

Mother angrily hits the table:

-- Enough, so spoiled! You can't even eat yourself?! Are you stupid?! When did you become such a klutz?! You have a fine example before you! If you can't do anything, you should've just watched Shinya and learned!

Mm, yeah... You know, mother.

That was the one line that should've never been told.

-- Ah?..

Makina's eyes shine, like lenses:

-- Mother, can I do something myself?

-- Of course. You're not a child, so if you don't understand something, copy Shinya. You won't bother anyone that way, and that's enough.

Don't give her a goal.

Don't teach her the methods.

This mechanism must not be started.

-- Ahh. I see... I'll do so.

After that, Hisaori family's history turns around to be a real mess.

Well, and me...

Whatever I did, nothing worked out well.

3

In high school, we with Makina started learning in same class. To be honest, I thought it couldn't get worse.

"Older sister repeating grade because of low attendance" - this crest doesn't suit me. Father's poverty brought me misfortune here too - he didn't want to pay for our education, so he only let us take exams in a local high school.

Makina would surely drag me down. She can't even eat alone - who would like such a girl? No one. Weak are deprived of human rights in school. Pride, physique, difference in grades, and looking like it's a matter of course to blame you in all her sins. Makina has it all. If she'll get bullied, no one will save her. Because it's meaningless to save her. You save her, and she's thoroughly rotten, and in the end you only get more problems. If it wasn't for relatives, I don't think anyone could be kind to her.

But high school life, which begun with a headache about ostracism, appeared, in fact, beautiful.

For the first month, Makina spared me her presence in classroom.

In this local high school I have many acquaintances, and teachers remembered me from the good side, so I became central figure of the class, found friends and trust. Sometimes a topic about my absent sister was raised, but I'm already used to avoiding that talk. Graduating from middle school to high school, Hisaori Shinya made yet another great step.

... But there was one thing. One thing that bothered me. Makina stopped leaving her room.

Every time I felt a stare and turned around, Makina was always looking at me. There wasn't a day when our gazes didn't meet. I got irritated by that, and stared at her in return. Before, she always fled... But now, bearing the unfriendly stare, she kept closely watching me. Without blinking, like a camera, she kept looking at Hisaori Shinya.

In May, I realized that I'm uncomfortable with that.

One evening, dad was in unusually good mood and was talking to Makina about all sorts of stuff. Something about successful work, thanks to Makina, something else... Not funny. I remembered how we were sitting behind this same table when we were still kids.

-- So, Makina, I bought you a cage, but don't you want a bird?

-- No. I have a cage, why would I need what's inside?

Dad was happily smiling. Makina asked to buy something - it's a rarity. Dad agreed to buy it - it's a rarity too. I kept watching this scene from the side, alienated, and after those words I finally got it.

Dad called Makina by her name, and Makina, without saying a word, is casually smiling in return.

Relationship between Makina and dad got strangely better. One Sunday, when I came back after club activities, dad and Makina were playing ball outside. They often went shopping. After bath, they were watching TV together.

-- Thanks, Shinya, now Makina cheered up!

Mother was looking at them with a long forgotten face expression. I didn't do anything, but Makina cheered up because of me, she says... For some reason, I became disgusted.

"You know, Makina. I actually wanted a son like you."

And he happily patted Makina's head. I swear, Makina is not a boy.

So disgusting, so nauseating. Of course it is - how could a completely isolated person become so normal again in just one month? How could daughter, hated so much by her parents, get along with them so fast? I didn't understand what's the most disgusting part of it at first.

And so, in June, Makina came back to school, like nothing happened.

From that time I started having nightmares.

I opened my eyes from an indescribable feeling of occlusion.

It happens at midnight, lights are off. I throw a look at the door - it's opened a little. Surely, *something is watching*.

Behind the door, darkness is much deeper than in the room; uncovered, interrupted breath.

In that gap...

Pupil, like a camera. A creature, made of eye alone...

*

From the side, we with Makina looked like a friendly family. Makina was bit by bit getting along with her classmates, making friends, cleaning her tainted name.

"Schoolgirl that wasn't coming to classes" is a weakling that is to blame.

But "schoolgirl trying to come to classes again" is a weakling that is to be defended.

If I ignore such a righteous sister, I'll become the one to blame. As a good brother, I could only silently watch over Makina's rehabilitation. Even if I was completely disgusted with it.

Makina peacefully, smoothly, was becoming part of class. Completely unlike her. Such a honestly average behavior was coming from Makina I didn't know. I feel like spitting. A monster like that can't get along with us people. With such an obviously forced smile you can't get popular, it's too fake. Such a newcomer can't get other people's trust, it would be too shallow. World that I supported can't be so simple.

-- What, she's easy to talk to. Hisaori-san, mm, even though she's a girl, she's like a guy. And again, she's nice to talk to.

-- Makina is really like you.

-- Really? Isn't it the opposite? More like Shinya-kun is like Makina-san.

That's what middle school friends are saying. Like Hisaori Shinya has two bodies.

"If you can't do anything, you should just watch Shinya and learn!"

Yes... I knew that without saying.

There was another me in the class. From the everyday habits to learning and grades. From the manner of speaking - supporting the partner, then returning to yourself - to general topics and personal likings that are scary to others. All of that was mine.

Really, I feel like spitting. "Stop that!.." Her new life completely changed in two months.

*

From day to day, Makina's imitation kept focusing.

From learning to detailed copying.

From retelling to complete playback.

She kept diligently imitating Hisaori Shinya.

What for - I don't know. Her head's working multitude times better than mine.

Even if she just decided to act like me, for whatever reason, in the end a perfect, better personality would appear. She just concentrated on imitating.

Something was seriously wrong with her. Copying your idol's tastes is fine.

Sometimes you get inspired by someone and you feel like becoming just like that person. But for Makina I'm just a person that happened to be close at the moment. Like a random passerby. Can you psychologically copy actions of someone like that? No interest, no respect, he can't be a goal. It is not worth the efforts and time. Is that really a possible thought for a living being? Even a monster should have its own motives, own will.

But all I could do was swallow my discontent.

Makina became a positive and reasonable, sane, role model student, and I, even though knowing how heinous she is, could only just keep on playing friendly

relatives with her.

Completely useless effort. Even without it the balance kept on shifting everyday, and the year repeating loser was becoming a spotlight in class, just like me. She became a leader among girls, and I was a leader among guys. It probably looked like we're a happy family.

At home though, there was only one spotlight.

In just two months, Hisaori family completely restructured. Parents stopped looking at Shinya and started to see the happiness in Makina's smile. With every coming day I felt it's becoming harder and harder to live there.

"Say, Shinya. Can't you give your room to your sister?"

Not funny. I won that room. Makina, after running away to storage room, can't just simply return there.

"Makina, are you free next weekend? Dad wants to go to one place."

Enviably honest. He was wearing a fake smile mask before, and now he's shamelessly spoiling her.

I've got enough of that family lunch. I get up to come back to my room.

-- Wait, Shinya. Relax your right shoulder before sleeping, or your neck would get stiff at morning.

Is that so. Bathing in parents' care, Makina tells me about Hisaori Shinya's - mine - body feature, that I myself didn't know about. I feel like I heard shutter sound in her lifeless eyes.

Without a response, I averted my eyes and rushed to my room. Probably because I lost peace of mind from Makina's dominance. My room, which I was heartfully cleaning, was becoming dirtier and dirtier. Today too, I ignored it and fell onto bed.

Next morning I woke up with a stiff neck, because I ignored Makina's warning. Well, of course.

-- Good morning, Makina. Oh, is your neck stiff? Are you alright?

During breakfast it appeared, that predicting even my ignorance, Makina woke up with a stiff neck.

Excessive imitation is but an aggression to original. Starting from second semester, Hisaori Shinya's chair almost managed to drop me down.

One day, my friend declined my offer to go for a walk. He said he got some urgent business to deal with, no time to play. He rarely rejected my offers, but why not, it can happen to anyone. I didn't give it much thought, and walked downtown for shopping, where I accidentally saw Makina...

-- What the hell?..

... next to whom faces of my friends, who rejected my invitation, were shining with smiles.

I don't want to remember what I felt back then. They were the ones who broke the promise. I'm right, but I'm a victim in all possible ways. I rushed home right away. Just because if they noticed me, I'd feel ashamed.

"H-Hi, Shinya. I just accidentally met Makina there."

Stop it. Excuses like that make it even worse. If you say those excuses, it will only add to the cold.

"What the... Think a little, come on. Okay, okay. Shinya, want to come with us?"

I don't even want to think about it!.. It will be me that would be like an avoided, but putting his nose everywhere loser with no friends!..

-- Uh, uh, uh, a-a-a-ah!

I flew into the room, shut the door and screamed. I feel like doing it. I feel like letting all that anger out on that meaningless cleanliness, mess it all up. But my self-esteem didn't let me do it. Stop. Stop. Stop. No need to look for compensation. I didn't lose anything. No, nothing, I will only trip on my own foot and roll down. Now it's best to just calm down. But I can't seem to do it. Looks like I got asthma now. My head started aching, I almost fell from dizziness, when - *click* - the closed door opened.

-- Sister...

Makina enters. I retreat to bed. Makina stands motionless in the messed up room.

-- W... What do you want? Don't enter others' rooms without permission.

-- Yup. I just saw you. You ran away all of a sudden. Something happened?

Asthma disappeared. Dizziness was gone. Instead of that, I felt my brain being set on fire, and I almost got smoke coming out of my ears.

-- What, what. How serious you are anyway?

I mumble. This is bad. My throat burns. This is bad. I understand what you're trying to say, but questioning me so much is unreasonable. I said that already long ago - this monstrous creature, as soon as you know its true face, starts attacking people.

-- Serious about what? Did I do something to you, Shinya?

-- And you keep doing it, openly... What was that? Why were you with Saitou and others, sis? You're a girl, why don't you just have fun with girls? Why... why did you have to steal my friends?!

But this can't be stopped. Irritated, and probably scared, I can't stop my words.

-- Ah, so that's it, - she says.

Closes her eyes.

And then Makina...

-- But Saitou-kun called me himself. He says, Shinya is boring. He's *not even special* anymore. He said, if he is to choose between me and him, I'm more interesting.

...awkwardly chuckled, like she's pitying me.

-- Kh-h!..

Bang! - a sharp sound.

Everything went white, my right fist is on fire.

Makina didn't even yelp. She just limply falls on her butt.

-- Ah... eh?..

Humane reasoning is crumbling. It's unpleasant. For the first time, I used brute force, and it was so abhorrent I felt like rolling time back. Makina turned away and rubbed a newborn bruise on her right cheek. She got quiet because she's surprised with little brother hitting her? No. She... it can't be... is smiling?..

-- You're disgusting.

Makina is the weak one, I'm the one swinging fists. But my legs are shaking, and

Makina's shoulders are quivering.

-- What are you laughing at, shut up! What's so funny?! You're crazy! Get scared, like before!..

-- Nothing's funny. Never before I thought of anything as fun.

Slowly raises her gaze. Monster, with shining camera eyes...

-- That's why I couldn't do anything as myself... But yes. I tried to take your place, Shinya, and it seems to be entertaining.

... for the first time on my memory she really laughed in joy - he-he.

Question that was tormenting me from the very childhood got an answer. What was so disgusting in her? It's so simple. Makina was crying, she was getting angry. But she never once rejoiced.

-- Fun... wh... why?

Scared, I could only ask this... If I started to beg her to stop this, maybe she would've done so. Too late.

-- Weeell. It's funnier for everyone this way! You can disappear, Shinya. I'll be Shinya instead. Because, you see, *I'm better at being Shinya than you.*

She can't be stopped anymore. I looked at my right fist, red in Makina's blood. Don't laugh. Don't laugh, don't laugh, don't laugh. You're not the one everyone loves. You're not the one for whom everything goes well. Don't copy me. Don't move. What the hell, what the hell, you, you...

-- You can't do nothing but copy me!..

A hit sounded in the room. Makina hits the wall, a shelf falls down, books drop on her head. Slight bleeding. A bit to the right, and her eye would've been damaged.

For how long that destruction was continuing?.. I only remember how mother came back and bandaged Makina. Wounds on her face were minor, so she was alright. But there was no longer a place for me in the house.

Dad scolded me. Makina stood up to me. Mother got touched by sister's kindness. I dully looked at the fallen shelf. Sigh... It was the one we built together with sister in our childhood, my favorite shelf...

Tendency got even stronger.

What came after that is obvious. Parents were charmed with Makina, I lost more friends. I was becoming more and more scared of being cornered, and I desperately fought to avoid that. But nothing worked out well for me. Because Makina could do my actions better than me - too good. I stopped understanding, how I became successful before, and in the end, I was forced to learn from Makina.

She was supposedly the one copying me, but now it's me who tries to catch up. I'm learning from her, how to be Hisaori Shinya she's imagining. I don't even understand what was I like originally.

The end came abruptly.

The class I still had my place in, I dropped myself. Because of a trifle matter. One morning, I came into classroom, Makina was giving out printouts. "It's my responsibility as the class representative, not yours.", I said, and raised my hand at Makina, just like at home.

"Why are you doing this?!", I said. And the exact same phrase came back to me from everyone else.

The next day, when I entered classroom, my desk was thrown away.

Mhm, eh... Who was the first to drop school? Well, doesn't matter.

From the second semester I stopped coming to school and was sitting in my room. Everything was a mess there, like in dirty ruins scheduled for demolition. My mother came in from time to time, worried, and dad only came in once, in the end.

Makina - I think she was always in my room. I remembered how Makina was before, and just like her I was bearing the torture of time. Looking at nothing, thinking of nothing. I think Makina was living just like that.

So Hisaori Shinya is deprived of any qualities of value. It's meaningless to copy

him. Leave him alone. I can't do anything and I'm good for nothing now.

-- Uh...

But when parents were asleep, when I was in kitchen, or when I was walking the hallway to toilet and turned around, Makina was silently standing there.

Watching me, clicking with her shutters. Those eyes kept watching me, not person, but trash. And mechanic, cold voice said:

-- Hey... *Are you not going to do anything new?*

I screamed and ran away to my room. Closed my door. Got under the blanket.

Light is long broken. I closed windows, shutters, isolated myself. In my room is darkness, only light from under the door gets in.

But she can see right through me, even if I lock myself in the room, she watches my every move.

Yes... It was always like that. Why didn't I notice it before? Fleeing to my room was the mistake. It's a cage. Everyday I was under her watch. How? Hah.

There's nothing this monster can't do. If I open shutters now, there's a huge eye looking inside my room.

-- No... No, no, don't, stop...

When Makina was copying me, it was fine. But when I have nothing left to show her, my usefulness is gone. Makina always burns the books after reading them.

So now, even when I hide so she stops seeing through me...

-- You can't do it like that, Shinya. Even if you manage to cut your wrist with that, it will only hurt. To do it properly, you would need at least that hard knife you stole yesterday.

Someone, help me...

It feels like this room is inside her eyeball.

... In the end, it became apparent. I couldn't become Makina.

Life without any thoughts can't be achieved with a soul. I was all cracked, but wasn't crumbling yet. I was afraid of Makina, and then I got tired from being scared and started thinking of a way out from this situation.

To start with - can't I do something so Makina leaves me alone? She was copying me because I didn't save her from her classmates' bullying. It's her revenge. If I say sorry, maybe she'll forgive me - I hoped, got up from bed and talked to Makina, who was right here.

"Why? I never was mad at you", she says, fixing the broken shelf.

Family voices, coming from kitchen:

"Dad, maybe it's time to throw away that cage?"

"Do whatever you want, Makina. But why do you want to throw it away? I thought you treasured it."

"Nah. I never once treasured it. Inside it was just a meaningless worm anyway. And it's boring, to be honest."

-- Ha... Ha-ha!

I felt like killing her. Locked body and constantly thieved soul reached a limit and broke it. What's with that everyday tone. Like everything's over. She stole "Hisaori Shinya", and no one cares now?!

-- Yes... How naive I am...

Not revenge, not being mad - she won't be touched by such humane emotions. It's meaningless to say sorry. She never had any feelings about me. So now she'll get for it.

If I become useless to her now.

Before that, I'll avenge myself.

Burning, inextinguishable determination. All fired up, I waited for night, made sure it's past two o'clock, and started to look for a fitting tool...

How lucky. Even though a toy, there was a baseball bat in cabinet.

-- Ha-a-a...

Toy, but made of steel. It's gonna hurt if you get hit with that.

-- Ha-a-ah...

But it can't be helped. I rewound everything that happened in my memory, concentrated my hate. Hand, tightly gripping the handle... Ha, it's lighter than I thought! Even I will manage like that. Slowing my breath, quietly, I open the door. Now through hallway, through kitchen, and then to Makina's room.

Yes, I had to do so from the start. I'm not weaker than her. Even Makina is a girl, if she gets hit with a bat so it hurts, b... b-break her hand, at least - she'll think about it and understand it's dangerous to corner me.

-- Ha-a... ha-a...

I enter the hallway. Four steps after, I enter kitchen. The lights are out. Kitchen is covered in darkness. No human presence.

Some more steps, and kitchen is left behind.

At the same time...

-- Ah?..

At the other side of the kitchen, before the opened storage room door...

Stood Hisaori Makina.

Like in a mirror. At exactly same time that I entered kitchen, Makina left her room. In my hand, I hold baseball bat. In her hand is a sharpened, shiny knife.

-- M-m...

It was a complete imitation. She knows Hisaori Shinya's conscience's state, she knows its limits, she's imitating Hisaori Shinya.

But - a knife and a bat. My Shinya wanted to *scare*, Makina's Shinya wanted to *kill*.

-- Damn.

Makina smiles in embarrassment.

-- Eh, so I made a mistake in the end. Sorry, Shinya, you appeared to be smaller. That's when it happened, I guess.

What was before me finally crumbled to dust.

I can't defeat *this*. I can do whatever I want, but my Hisaori Shinya can't match her Shinya. I just didn't understand before, that I'm already an empty old caterpillar cocoon, left to be stepped on and forgotten.

Beginning of 2001. My last story before I came to clinic.

That day was Makina's birthday. It wasn't even mentioned until last year, but now from dusk mother and father were engrossed in preparation. I locked myself in my room and I only pray for dawn to come.

"Hisaori Shinya" long in Makina's ownership. She just has to wish for it, and I'll disappear. Makina's birthday. Holy resurrection of the one who was dead, but reborn as Hisaori Shinya.

Makina got lively from the very morning. She called me to join in a lot of times. Saying I should dine with everyone at least today. Not funny. Even in this room I feel like disappearing from others' gazes, and down below, in light, if I meet eyes with Makina, my heart will stop for sure.

-- Come on already, Shinya. It's your sister's birthday.

I kept on ignoring calls for me, and it seems like mother lost her patience. She opened the almost always locked door and entered my room. Without any restraint, to the very center of it. Where Makina is always standing, in the very center of the ruin.

"Why are you still sleeping? And the room is a mess, when will you already..."
...become like your older sister?

Boring. Hallway lights are blinding. If I close the door - they scold me... I'll go back to darkness. Mother's still here.

"You hear me? It's sister's birthday today! Makina doesn't like that you're not there. She says she wants to celebrate with Shinya!"

Boring. Makina. Makina. Makina. Mother's proudly saying her name. She's so boring. Why do you care about me, you're just dragging me out of bed to please Makina. Enough. Stop it. I don't want it. I'm sad to see Makina, to see you so happily talk to Makina. If you care about Makina so much...

"Come on... Sister's waiting for you."

... please, I'm begging you, leave me alooooone!..

-- Kh!..

I push away. To the side of the door, which the uncalled guest came in through, I push this Makina's pawn. *Bang* - sound of hitting against the closed door, *slap* - sound of falling down on the butt.

-- Shinya! What are you...

Angry mother. At the moment when I thought it happened before... *Creak!*

-- He... ah?

From mother's neck, a fountain of blood gushed forth.

And... a sound of falling junk. In the light from the gap in the door, I somehow check on the situation.

Right above the door - when did it appear there? - tilted, was a shelf with a broken bracket, and stuff from it dropped on mother. And in mother's throat was a shining blade, which dropped on the floor, precisely slicing her throat.

It has to be said, it was beautiful. Blade fell vertically, but, as if it was funneled, it caught mother's throat with a sharp tip and sliced it through.

-- He-ey... Mom?..

No answer. Forced breathing sound. Sea of blood. Can't even say if she's alive or not.

-- Sh... Shi... he... lp...

Shinya, help. I don't understand it like that, mom. You could try to learn, say, ventriloquism.

-- Kh-h...

I look at the murder weapon. Knife. The one that was supposed to kill me. I didn't have time to understand what that means, when...

"What's with the noise? Did something happen?"

...dad's voice came from the hallway. Door handle turns. Mother is blocking the door. Dad forcefully opened the door, and still breathing mother's body rolled on the floor.

"Mother?.."

What scary image appeared before his eyes?..

Dad's reaction was a pleasantly fitting calmness. First thing first, he hit me,

standing dumbfounded, and then right away checked mother's condition. Ripped her clothes, and put them to her throat. Decided that it's dangerous to move her, and, yelling at me not to move, ran through the hallway. Step-step-step... But it wasn't right. Dad, wanting to call an ambulance as soon as possible, ran through a narrow kitchen hallway to kitchen, and..

"Gh-h!.."

...*bang* - he tripped over something and fell down. I heard the sound of falling.

Problem appeared later. When I was waiting and waiting, but neither the sound of him getting up, nor the dinging sound of picking up phone wasn't heard.

Silence. The only thing heard was mother's breathing.

I sneak out of the room and pass the brightly lit hallway. It's even brighter there, and next to the dinner table.

With a blade deeply stuck in his left eye, lied motionless father's body.

-- It's dangerous to walk with things like that, Shinya.

On the other side of the table, before the phone, without a single drop of blood on her clothes, stands smiling Makina.

As she said "with things like that", I look at my hand - it was gripping a knife.

Nervously, I relax my grip. *Thum* - stained blade gets stuck in the floor.

-- Sister...

What happened - I can't even think about it.

Did father die, or is he on brink of death, like mother - that's all I'm thinking about.

-- Sister...

Stupid me, I still had some hope left. I wanted to explain the situation somehow, call ambulance, but...

-- Good job, Shinya. So, where did that thing hit mother? Right eye or jugular vein?

... I realized. *This* here, that is talking to me, was the one that gave father the decisive strike.

-- Do you not hear me? I'm asking, what's up with mother. The shelf fell, right? I didn't see it, at least tell me about it. What did it pierce, right eye or throat?

I'm getting sick. No point in asking Makina what happened. She's not interested whether mom is alive or dead, she's only interested in where the knife hit her.

-- How do you know this?..

Worry for mom and dad was defeated by terror.

Doesn't matter. Not the shelf, not the knife that shouldn't have been there, not the motionless dad. There's no point to ask about anything of it, it's all apparent anyway.

But why? Why does she know so precisely what happened to mother?..

-- What's with you? It's just math and physics. I know the size and mass of mother's body, her step length, put it all in formulae and the result is obvious.

What were you doing in school all that time, Shinya?

Ahh... So that's how it is.

My room wasn't organized by me. She's the one that arranged everything so it happens. Messy floor, broken light, the place from which she was talking to me - everything was arranged so she can reach her goal.

And then she just had to wait for when all conditions were met. Today wasn't the time for decisive actions, and she, who didn't care when to start, was waiting for me to flip the switch. She kept waiting for Hisaori Shinya to attack his mother.

-- But why? Stop that. If you decided to do it, there are softer methods.

I'm small. I'm not ready to kill, you know it better than I do.

-- O-oh. I see. Mother has a life-threatening wound. Well, the difference between life and death was about whether she stood on her feet or fell on her butt. I tried to add the weight as much as I could, but in the end the distance was depending on you two. Both you and mother were unlucky.

If I was a bit weaker, if mother stood a bit steadier, if the room wasn't in a mess, she wouldn't have fallen?

But you know what, Makina. With all that said, you didn't leave father, lying here, to his luck.

-- Yup, what's with mother, I understand. Now it's time to go on.

Makina turns around and picks up the phone.

-- What are you... doing?

-- What? I'm calling police, obviously. We have such a terrifying occurrence here.

I'm failing to understand that.

Police? Not ambulance? But after that, Makina would be arrested. After all, this tragedy was arranged by...

Ah...

-- Got it? Shinya, your clothes are stained with blood. that's a problem. Also, as a fact, in Hisaori family's circumstances half a year ago, you used brute force on me couple times.

-- ...

Narrowness of thinking from self-inflicted damage. For panorama, use fisheye lens. I felt dizziness, my body tried to part with my consciousness.

I feel like I've lost my mind. Makina is pressing the buttons.

-- You know who would they think did it. Oh, here. Hello, police?

-- Ah!..

Can't allow. Can't allow. Can't allow. A bat. For some reason, a bat was conveniently lying in kitchen, I'll redo what I couldn't do that night, hand, at least a hand, yes, at least her hand I had to break back then!..

-- A-a-a-a-a-a-a-ah!!

I swing the bat with all I have. Full-swing at Makina's right hand, gripping the phone. Amazing, world-ripping sound. Phone dropped down, I break it too.

- Ah... ah, ha-ha, ah...

Saved... Can't call police now. Police has to come for her, but I could stop her in time. Oh...

-- E-eh. Broke a phone?

With a broken hand, Makina moves to balcony with light steps.

-- You're so scary, Shinya. You *don't want police to be called* that much?

Ha... Ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha. A-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

-- And now, farewell. You finally released your chair.

She opens a window. Outside is a beautiful sunset. Red balcony - just like back then, when she saw a ghost.

-- But don't worry. Shinya will be isolated from society, but I'll continue Shinya's way of acting.

Yes... She'll take Hisaori Shinya's place, and I'll be forgotten by everyone. Only one person can sit in a chair. For Makina to sit there, the weak, pitiful, but still owning the chair me had to be disposed of first.

-- Sister... sister, sister, sister...

I don't know myself what I want to say.

I want forgiveness, I want help, maybe I want to believe that *this* is my sister... And *this*, chuckling in the end...

-- Stupid... Bye-bye, Shinya.

From the side it looked like she was running away from me, laughing, jumping from the third floor's balcony.

...*Smack*.

6

Three years after Hisaori Shinya was arrested, charged in murder of his parents and physical violence to his sister, beginning of year 2004.

I was put on accounting, but still, they let me to rehabilitate. I had a chance again.

Of course, she didn't die back then, she only lost her hand. She was supposed to come out unscratched, but the broken hand messed her plan. So she's not almighty. Maybe it was heavenly punishment, but after that she was, just like me, isolated from the world for thorough examination.

The plan to to empty me, drive me away from Hisaori Shinya was flawless, but when everything was over, she was adjudged to be possessed. Isn't it a little to late, damn it? I knew it many years ago that she wasn't human.

With that, of course, I got mitigating circumstances. As I was living with an A-syndrome carrier, lawyer kept talking about huge psychological pressure.

I got discharged, my relatives happily accepted me, with orphan aid I can survive without work for now.

Of course, I don't intend to do it. After three years in a hospital I became a different creature. This is the last chance. This time I won't make a mistake. I want to do what happened to be my duty, so that I get relieved of it even a second earlier. Luckily, the hardest part - finance - solved itself. Empty, lifeless thoughts finally got realistic. There is a lot of reasons to be worried, but talent and money are paired. Even with my level of abilities, I can cover the holes in my talent with money. If fortune doesn't turn away from me, I'll succeed.

Well... When you aren't thinking about how to increase amount of money or happiness, things are going fine - it's life.

\Hands.cut

2\ Self(L)

Maybe it's not okay to say that about yourself...

But well, it was a lousy rehabilitation in society.

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-- That's it. From today on, Ishizue Arika is discharged from this clinic. Now a specially assigned inspector would keep a watch on him and register his life. Of course, as Ishizue Arika was recognized latent, he is now accounted as A-syndrome carrier and will get treated accordingly. In case he shows any signs of being unprepared to casual life, inspector is to act immediately. Any questions? Medical expert Touma Mato, wearing a strict black suit, pressures assigned patient with a sharp look.

2004, August. In the examination room of Oruga clinic - probably for the last time - I merrily deal with the documents.

-- Shozai. Any questions?

-- No more questions, inspector, sir!

"Sir!" - I salute Mato-san. My authority knits her eyebrows, not understanding the joke.

Well, what to say. If you ask how bad it is, "she's going to keep me on a tight leash even after I'm discharged, help".

-- Ohh... What a time did you choose to get discharged of here, all clean and innocent. Why can't your kin ever choose the right time?

-- It was you who decided on my discharge time, don't blame everything on me.

Let me say this now, I didn't yet commit any crimes... Well, I forget everything that's happening during the day, so I'm not that sure, but I don't think I had any screw-ups anyway. But Mato-san treats all people as criminals. Parents' sins are children's sins... or more like, sister's sins are brother's sins.

-- I'm sorry, but did you just say "your kin"?

-- I did. Seriously, Shozai. Your discharge, you know, had to be more loud or

something. But last evening they gave us a changed order. Discharge is decided on, do it by any means, but quietly, so that people don't really pay attention to it. Do you know what is this about?

Mato-san spins a ball pen, not looking in my eyes. Not for entertainment. Surely, it's...

-- Not a slightest clue. But yeah, we might look like criminals.

-- You don't look like criminals, you are criminals.

Crack. She gets angry and pen breaks. Third one by now. Touma-san doesn't hold herself back even before the inventory.

-- That's rough... But that's not about me, right? I can get discharged, but it's to be quiet... Ahh, did the previous one do something?

-- Bingo. It's nice to talk you during the day. Hey you, bring a pen. A hard one, if possible.

Nurse, quietly breathing in the room, shuddered, and gave Touma her own pen. Will it be the fourth?.. Mato-san could maybe smoke to calm down. Even though I never saw her smoking.

-- By the way, Shozai. Do you remember Hisaori, that got discharged half a year ago?

-- I don't remember the face, but I remember what she was like. Should I show you my Hisaori page?

-- It's okay, I already got a general picture about her this morning. You are not connected to Hisaori Makina, that's for sure and confirmed... Oh. She did count you in, and you yourself don't have anything to do with it, but...

Vrrr, vrrr, spins the grinder -- I mean, the pen. They should've given her a fountain pen, so ultimately less damage would be done in the end.

-- In the end, society treats everyone discharged from here as the same. She screws up - and you get hit by it too. When you go outside, they'll be looking at you a bit cold - you'll need to be audacious to survive. Hisaori's case can be closed any day, even tomorrow.

-- ...

Hisaori obviously got into some mess. Precisely a year ago I got acquainted with Hisaori *Makina*, who called herself Hisaori*Shinya*. We only met during daytime,

I don't remember her, but I have a lot of notes about her. I have problems with my left hand, and she has problems with her right - and somehow we got along. My notes keep saying: "Hisaori. Weird one." Why did they, I understood half a year before her discharge - Dr. Dolittle told me Hisaori Makina can't do anything herself, so she lived copying her younger brother, Hisaori Shinya. Of course she'd appear as weird. She's a girl, but she talks and acts completely like a guy.

-- So, what now? And how's Hisaori? Mato-san, your glance is kinda scary.

-- That's because I'm tired. I didn't sleep the whole night because of Hisaori. And protocols all seem to point on false accusation. After I send you off, I'll go argue with jurisdictional inspector assistant. I don't feel like wiping off possessed, but I don't feel like wiping off powerless relatives even more... Seriously, examinations here last couple years are terrible. More and more cases each year, and it's only the budget that doesn't catch up with time. Examinations of corpses and patients all end up as a single sheet of paper. For how long have I been saying, invest more finances in it...

I silently listen to Mato-san's rants. She's unrivaled, but that's why she doesn't have allies either.

-- But anyway, Shozai, here's what I want to say...

-- Yes-yes? What is it, inspector Touma, sir?

-- Even unintentionally, don't spoil my name. If I, for example, become an assigned inspector for Hisaori Makina.

That goes without saying. Hisaori is already a lost cause.

-- Roger that. I'll sincerely live an adult life in a dark corner of society.

-- That's good. Well, you have an hour till discharge. What are you going to do here, rest a bit?

-- Ehh... no, I wanted to say goodbye to doc, so I'll go. Will you come too, Mato-san?

-- I won't. I'm not going to waste time. Go alone. Ah right, Shozai, are you still looking for a prosthesis?

I've just stood up when she stopped me. With a rare for Mato-san voice, hiding reluctance.

-- I am, why?

-- Well... just that, if you really need one, I can introduce you to one perspective. But to be honest, I don't like it... You see, they really want to meet you. She gives a soulful, melancholic sigh. More than the topic about prosthesis, I was surprised by how this unsinkable person can go into blues.

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-- Do you understand, Arika-kun? You need not self-confidence, you need someone who needs you. Use your whole life, but find that person. That's the reason you should live.

-- ...

The confessional that I came to to say goodbyes. Dr. Dolittle, as usual, speaks like a romanticist.

-- Hm... What's wrong, Arika-kun? What's with that deadly pale face, saying "When are they finally going to discharge me?..."

-- Nothing like that, doc. You said those parting words pretty well.

But it appears I can't accept a value for myself. But nevertheless, going forward is very human-like. It's easier, after all.

-- Ooh. Hisaori-san, I recall, so readily agreed. Arika-kun, did those six months not spoil your character by any chance?

-- I got your idea, doc, but that's all. But why did you mention Hisaori? Did she come here before leaving too?

-- Yeah. Just like you, she came for an advice on what to do after discharge.

-- Just like me, eh... It's not like her to think about outside world, is it? Say, doc, Hisaori needs to copy someone, right? What was she like when she came here?

-- That, I can't tell you. Patient's privacy.

Dr. Dolittle smiled. Even though he's such a holy saint and a friend to every patient, Oruga clinic is what brought him up. Patient's health is main priority. By any means achieved, if patient is in normal state - those scary people-doctors can ignore everything else.

-- Fine. It's not going to matter to me the slightest. It's time for me to go now,

doc. Thanks for bearing with me this whole year.

Mainly visiting me to kill time. Whether we'll meet again is up to my fate and Mato-san's mood.

-- Same here. By the way, Arika-kun, did you say your goodbyes to doctor Mato yet?

-- I would gladly, but can't. I didn't say it yet, but my inspector is a scaring-spoiled-children-to-heart-attacks Tomato-chan.

Dolittle bursts. Looks like he liked that nickname.

-- Ahh, so much worries, right, Arika-kun?

-- I'm worried about your tact, doc. You should condole me, not laugh.

-- Oh, I do, I wholeheartedly do... But still, "Tomato-chan"... Did you ever say that to doctor Toma directly?

-- Ehh... Only once. By an accident.

A horrible memory. It was an evening. Sadly, the sun has already set. Thriller... horror...

-- Wow. Please, tell me about it. I'll note for myself if doctor Toma has a sense of humor.

-- Alright, why not. Well, I blurted out "Tomato-chan", she suddenly got all serious, jumped up from her chair, saying 'sit here', and left. Then she comes back from kitchen with a real tomato. And right before my face - *splash* - crushes it, and says: "Shozai. I get it you want the same to happen with you?" How do you like it?.. No, she's too scary to joke with!

Doc burst out laughing. It was worth it. Seeing Dolittle laugh, holding his stomach, is a rare sight on level of Mato in blues mode.

-- Damn, really! Arika-kun, you're like a hero!

-- Doing my best. I wish I could forget it through my amnesia.

Ishizue Arika is not brave, he just lost the ability to feel "threat".

Animals that can't perceive stop-signals, like... those, flying to the fire. Like a small child playing on a highway.

-- Well, that saying, bye. Lead those lost lambs, shepherd.

-- Okay, - Dr. Dolittle gently smiled. Let's hope we won't see each other again. -

By the way, Arika-kun, did you know? Doctor Toma, say what you want, can't

bear tomatoes. She says she doesn't even want to touch them.

Hmm... Doesn't hate, just doesn't bear them - that's important.

Discharge went fast, and after one and a half year I come back to my birthnest - to Shikura town, on Shikura hill, to Ishizue residence. Mato-san is the one driving, car - red "Roadstar". Incredible mentality - hardly would you imagine a patient discharged from a clinic getting picked up by a cabriolet.

By the way, clinic's hospital charge was lower than I thought. "Weird", I say to Mato-san.

-- That includes your one and half a year's salary. I told you that your help wasn't voluntary.

I'm even uncomfortable a bit... That's why I, while keeping Mato-san at some distance, still entrust myself to her.

-- And also, Ishizue residence has a buyer. Sell it next month to pay clinical charges, count on it.

She says like that, while driving. Looks like she has already dealt with the inheritance tax and all problems like that. Without asking me.

-- Ehh, and when the house is bought, I'll live in a tent?

-- Of course no. It's made so that you can move to dorm at any time. If you want, you can do it right now. Yeah, I recommend it. Your kin is easier to watch if we gather you together.

Incredibly uncomfortable. That's why I, though wishing to flee from Evil Tomato, still put up with it.

-- Call me once in four days. If you don't, I'll think you're either dead or on the run.

Releasing me near "Ishizue" sign, saying "Well, bye", the "Roadstar" does a drifted turn and disappears.

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The community dorms for A-syndrome carriers was on Shikura town's north, on exact opposite side of Shikura hill relatively to the train station. Building of

social help and welfare number 13. Sickingly easy to remember. After walking through concrete hallway, past the curtained guard booth, I go to a free room on fourth floor. Hurriedly examining Ishizue Arika's room, feeling slight alert about neighbor's barking dog, I got sad thinking about how I'll have to live here in a month.

-- ?

In third floor's hallway some loud people were having fun. The blue uniforms and hats suited them well, and they were, as they call them, cops. At the moment, diligently doing a search.

Getting involved is a pain, but I'd have to live here in a month. How can I not measure the risk? Ah, there, through a bunch of policemen, a man in a Hawaiian T-shirt came my way. This weirdo didn't look like a policeman at all.

-- Hi. Do you live here?

Hawaiian T-shirt guy - if you look closer, wearing make-up - gazed at me.

-- Hello? I'm getting in next month. Is it like that here everyday?

-- No, it's not, it's the first time I see something like that. Law enforcers checking through Arika-chan's room.

It was my turn to gaze at him this time. Hawaiian T-shirt guy is surprised again.

-- Hey... Aren't you by chance Arika-chan's brother? How weird. Different face, but you two seem very much alike.

-- I have a younger sister, but I doubt you mean her. By the way, my name is also "Arika". Ishizue Arika. Why, the guy whose room is being searched, does he have the same name?

-- Wow, your name's completely same?!

Surprised Hawaiian T-shirt guy still examined me and dived into thoughts. Then he said:

-- Hm-hm... So you're the real one?

-- What? Wow, you're pretty sharp.

-- Ah! Don't flatter me, you silly. I thought Arika-chan is weird too. Girl, but talks like a boy. And there I thought something's behind it. And it appears Arika-chan is a boy after all! Maybe I'm not the one to talk, but girls should act like girls, right?

-- Yeah. And guys should act like guys.

-- Yeah-yeah. Hmm... But who's the previous Arika-chan? I'm worried about her too. Though she's not my type.

-- Who knows. If I'm the real one, then she's someone that is not Ishizue Arika.

Finishing Hawaiian T-shirt guy's story: half a year ago a woman came here, calling herself my name, got in a mess and yesterday, finally, disappeared. Arika living here half a year ago had, yes, one hand and she was completely like me except for the face.

-- Weird though. An alias would have gotten discovered right away.

-- Nope, it wouldn't. There are no signs on doors, and after all, are you one of those that dig through new ones' family registers?

Who are "those"?..

-- How about mail? Or guard?

-- Silly you. It's all unformal. My name's Niijima, but most letters come to me by name "Flowerie". An alias is an alias. And the landlord gathers all the bills from the residents and pays himself.

So it's usual here to use aliases? And a guard here is wacky just like Niijima-chan, never meddling in residents' business. Realtors and owners nowadays are rarely familiar enough with residents. And an alias isn't in a way of being friends with neighbors, yeah.

-- But sometimes there is something still left in notes. Like driver's license or passbook...

Though, if I recall correctly, they're taking away driver's license when you're discharged. And passbooks, well, you don't usually show them to others.

-- Can I have you for a second? Hey, you, Ishizue Arika?

-- Oh crap...

Damn! Questioned by an investigator on the discharge day! It was stupid of me to fool around with Niijima-chan. The policeman in hallway heard my name and gave me out to investigators. What does that mean, Mato-san, cops are doing their job properly!

-- Yes, I'm Ishizue Arika. Going to live here starting next month. I'll tell you from the start, I wasn't the one living in that room over there, so yeah.

I don't want to go to the station "for further investigation", so I say everything as it is. But the police didn't stay idle either. It appears they already found out both that I wasn't in Shikura until today and that in the room under question was someone using my name as an alias.

-- Uhh... Yeah, can I ask you a question too?.. The one living under my name, who was that?

-- A girl called Hisaori Makina, same age as you. But you know what? That guy said you're same with her, but the only thing you have in common is that you're both one-handed. Oh, sorry, no hard feelings.

-- No hard feelings, I'm really one-handed, after all. By the way, ehh, Hisaori Makina? What was she doing under my name?

Investigator appears to be a nice guy, so I decide to find out more about it.

-- Ah-h. Blackmail, swindling... What else - some minor stuff about illegal trades. Just twenty years old, but already performed such violent beatings, I guess. Ah, and also...

I wonder why "I guess", but I'm even more interested on what's to follow.

-- And what also?

I ask a question appropriate for an innocent victim whose name was used.

The young investigator sighed out something like "already talking, guess I'll tell" and...

-- I guess it's the best one. Suspicion of murder of Hisaori Shinya.

... told me about an absolutely unrelated to me, Ishizue Arika, day ago finished case.

3\ Self(R)

And so the honeymoon I lived in was suddenly spoiled.

-- Today, at around six o'clock, in the industrial area of Nozu in Shikura city, in a residential array, a body of a young man was found, identified as Hisaori Shinya, nineteen years old, living in the said place. By the words of witnesses and Hisaori's notes, accused with his death is Hisaori Makina, being seen there at the time of....

Mood, raised by the fight before, crumbles to dust.

-- What the hell!

Irresponsible newsman keeps talking.

Hisaori Shinya was pierced with a sharp object in an abandoned Hisaori house, and now all the suspicion falls on his older sister, Hisaori Makina. It is incomprehensible, to the point of losing consciousness. Makina kills Shinya? How, and why?

-- Why is it me who killed him?

But all fits. I really came to industrial are of Noju a couple of hours ago. When I came into old Hisaori house, it was like a disposed shell. Means that Shinya was killed after I left. Who framed me is unknown.

The only obvious thing is that since I really was in that room, I'm screwed.

Fingerprints, hair, witnesses. Evidences of me being there can't be hidden.

-- By a strange coincidence, everything happened in the same room number 303, where three years ago died Hisaori Shinya's parents. The style of the murder is the same - Hisaori Shinya was killed with a cutting weapon. What could lead to repeat of the strategy? We believe we see a connection to A-syndrome...

They're reading Hisaori Shinya's dossier now. The case that took place three years ago. Accidental death of parents. Thrown from a balcony older sister, further recognized as A-syndrome carrier.

Looks like that's the main part in this show. Now they read dossier of Hisaori

Makina, discharged from a quarantine clinic half a year ago. Such an ungrateful newsman. Pleasing me with entertainment before, now he started talking too much.

-- Is he stupid? She killed Hisaori Shinya because she was mad about him publicizing her state? Those are just rumors. I'm at loss of words. She didn't... oh well, I'm bored of Ishizue Arika's skin anyway. I did not see Shinya all these three years, I'm not mad at him at all.

Yes, there is no reason to.

Just as there is no reason to get lynched by some minors that I saw for the first time in my life. And since I was Ishizue Arika, you had no reason to bully Makina either. And anyway, you are all thousand years too early to act out a revenge on me.

-- Fine. They don't understand because there's not enough.

Enough thinking about that. It's not clear what happened and how, but Ishizue Arika, whom I was until now, is no longer good. Events that will stay in memory are fine, but when you get in trouble, police will come right away. Residents of that area might recognize me as Ishizue Arika, but I'm Hisaori Makina in all my papers, and I can't get away from that. You don't even have to search for anything where I live. And then, suspiciously acting me, calling myself Ishizue Arika, and six times six liters of blood I unfortunately spilled half an hour ago, come together.

-- Unbelievable! What is this, why!..

I put on my garment. I no longer need my bank book. Putting the cash that piled up in my pocket, grabbing that only one, nicely framed, baggage for me, as Hisaori Makina, I leave the room that I lived in for half a year.

-- Stupid Shinya... I could stay longer!

Just how much are those newsmen allowed to blabber? Found Hisaori Shinya's body - that's probably true, but stories about Makina are no more than author's guesses! If it was an official viewpoint, my apartment would be filled with cops by now. But there are none, meaning that police examines Hisaori Shinya's body in no hurry... Sometime they'll finally remember Hisaori Makina, but be it good or bad, first ones to make such a guess were the rumors.

-- What to do, what to do, what to do!..

Slowing my breathing, I leave the area.

I clearly judge my situation and I'm not afraid to be thought a brother killer. It's obviously a false accusation, and even if they made it as if I were the one that killed him, I will at most be brought back to clinic. Not much to worry about.

That's why...

-- Ahh... ahh, a-a-ahh!

I only have one reason to get so unsightly mad.

-- What to do, I need to find next model...

Yes. Ever since I stopped being Ishizue Arika, I can't do anything, nothing will work out well for me. Because I became Hisaori Makina again...

*

From the time I ran away from dorm to the morning - ten hours. I go crazy, simultaneously somehow concealing myself. After hiding baggage so I can come get it later, making a kind face, with a half-smile, so it doesn't stay in memory, I force myself through the sea of people and move to the outskirts of town, where fields are. By the time I hid in one of the small forests scattered there, date has probably changed.

It was a night of recalling memories.

How many years has it been since I last returned to my head like that?

Only unnecessary things come up there.

Like a ghost I saw when I was a kid.

Like father, coming to kitchen gravely pale.

Like sound with which he, stepping back a bit, fell on his back.

Like a face, showing pain from the bearable pain in the back of the head, changing into surprise after seeing the falling knife.

My right hand hurts... When I become Makina like that, I can't help but get surprised by myself from that time. Why did I go that far? No matter how much I was pressured, it wasn't that bad.

-- But yeah. Having no place in life - that's my case.

But really - maybe I did overdo it?..

My gears with no limiters, my gas pedal and no breaks. That car will once fail to make a turn, such a train will soon fall off the rails.

I made a mistake not now, but long ago.

I was a perfect child, or so they say.

But it wasn't praise that I wanted, and I wasn't able to physically feel what glory is.

To something so amorphous I would prefer a much clearer light heartfelt warmth.

Maybe I was a failed creature in that too. I went the wrong way... Body is a plane, and soul is a beast that moves using limbs.

That's why I ask you, God.

Give this tiny soul a small vessel.

-- Ouch. How weird...

My right hand hurts. Ah right, I'm still walking with a prosthesis.

When I was fighting those six, it was moving, but now it isn't. It doesn't bother me, but it's disgusting, I want to take it off, but I can't.

-- Eh?.. Ah, ah?..

Because I - Hisaori Makina - can't do even that much.

I pity myself so much I want to cry.

I need to start my spring faster. I will be found out right away like that. I started thinking about what I want the most right now.

-- Ah, well yeah... Because why everything happened like that.

Who was the reason to go to that industrial area of Nozu, where I didn't need anything? Who talked with the burning with revenge to sister Hisaori Shinya?

I still had the basement of Karyou Kaie.

*

-- Oh, hi. You're early today.

After walking down a dark stairway, I opened a door.

Basked in ash-like sunlight coming through the sea at the ceiling, me and my consciousness were completely clear. Coming here only in as other people before, now I was here as my real self, straightly watching what I shouldn't have seen. Almost forgotten what I came here for... In the hour between me remembering this place and this moment, my heart, pressured by feeling of revenge and close to exploding with frustration on everything around it, was completely cleansed.

-- Hm? What's with you, you're all dirty. You can go get a bath.

Splashing water. Slowly moving ash sun. From the bed that has, despite being underground and underwater, a canopy attached, I hear a magnificent voice. A perfectly isolated space. Incredibly sterile space. In the middle of a room, without anything unsightly, as a matter of course...

-- Come on, hurry. You'll tell me an interesting story.

... was resting a terrifyingly beautiful creature.

I look at my hands. The fingers I was born with and the artificial fingers. The gifted right hand has the more slender, more elegant ones. But this creature's fingers I found even more wonderful. Without a form, great, unseen hands.

-- Karyou.... Kaie.

I was absolutely exhausted, in a full knockdown. Like a boxer that anyone would say that cannot bear to continue the fight.

-- Start with the door. Close it. Sit here. You didn't sleep since yesterday, right?

I start pitying myself. All these six months I was thinking with envy - how can he be so healthy in all aspects when he is in such a wounded body? How can he be so friendly? I'm the exact opposite. I have already forgotten how bad it feels to be myself.

-- Yeah... I did not. What about it?

Keep calm... I came here to get the story about Hisaori Shinya out of him. I got weaker, so I keep making wrong decisions. When my soul was cleansed, I had to run with all my might. And instead I'm like a moth flying into a fire, walking forward with unsteady feet.

-- Wow, you got it bad there. I thought you don't have any power at all by your breathing, but your heart is even more dried up. Sorry, let's talk later. No one is going to come here for now, so lie down on a sofa.

I feel like crying from all this belated pity. Why didn't I keep Ishizue Arika's face? I can't be here and if I'm caught I won't be able to return.

Stupid, I admit.

Hisaori Makina loves this creature, she's in awe from this dungeon. If only before I saw that ghost... if I was myself and came here...

-- No, I shouldn't... I just got into a silly situation and now I'm amazing myself.

Can I use the bathroom?

Getting into a skin I once dropped. Cheap show. Can't see anything with a mask on my face.

-- ...

Silence. From my awful spectacle Karyou-san makes a face like he just ate a lemon.

-- Well, it's fine. Use it to your heart's content. And don't forget the weapon.

I go to the bathroom and wash my face. I put the fruit knife to my back pocket.

As usually - as Ishizue Arika - I sit down on the floor before sofa.

-- Listen. About yesterday's, what happened to Hisaori Shinya.

I reluctantly start to talk... It doesn't go well. When I think and talk, I always come to a dead end. I started it pretty naturally, though.

-- Ahh. How unfortunate, he got killed by Hisaori Makina, -- said Karyou Kaie in a doubtless voice.

-- What... How do you... know that?

-- They said so in the morning news, just before you came. That police found Hisaori Shinya's body and main suspect is Hisaori Makina.

What the hell... bastards. They say that I killed him?

-- It's untrue. I didn't do this.

-- Indeed, Ishizue-san is completely unrelated.

-- Yes. That's why I want to ask you to be my witness, to say that I was here yesterday all day long. No, not even like that...

If he shelters me here, outside problems won't trouble me anymore...

-- Be a witness? I can, but the talk is somewhat off.

He giggled.

Black-haired creature, amused, looked at me:

-- Hisaori Shinya doesn't have anything at all to do with Ishizue Arika, right? Shinya was killed by his sister, Makina. Doesn't society know that already? More than all things in the world I didn't want to hear that, more than all things in the world I wanted to say it in such voice:

-- I told you, I didn't kill hi-i-i-im!!

The hurriedly put on mask easily falls off.

I rarely make blunders. But... *that*, on the bed, didn't pay it any mind.

-- Then it's okay. Were you Arika, were you Makina, if you didn't kill him - then it's slander. Murders are not something new to investigators. If there are any material evidences, they would know for sure, if there are none - they won't stop until they dig up the truth. To say about cases like that - *they stay in the memory, after all*.

-- Eh... ah?..

Wow. So this creature knows everything.

My killed right hand jerked. Mouth unpleasantly formed a smile.

-- What?.. What did you just say?

-- I said that the slander on Hisaori Makina would be over soon. But yeah, it won't go well after that. If they catch you - they will bring you to the clinic, even if temporary. Even if a person is innocent, that clinic is not so generous as to give slack for once freed possessed.

Indeed, can't say anything to that. "Bark, bark!" - the black dog, previously sleeping under the sofa, woke up from my hostility. Ah, so that's what it reacted to.

-- Hm... Are you in a conspiracy with Shinya?

-- Yesterday, when he came here, he asked me to smother what will happen next. So that when everything is over, if I see you, I would explain it to you, in his place. It was his last wish, I should fulfill it, or falling asleep would be scary. Defenseless. Even a toddler has more life reserve. I thought to stop his unpleasant blabber, but what can *it* do, except blabbering? We should talk a bit more.

-- When did you know I'm Hisaori Makina?

-- Your name I found out just now, the fact that you're not who you said you are -

right away. I didn't know your name, so I had to call you "Ishizue-san".

-- I don't understand... Kaie, did you have photos of Ishizue, or something?

-- No. One and a half year ago - no, already two, probably... His case was flashed a lot in news, I knew about it informatively, so to say.

Two years ago... I was already living in clinic's isolation then.

-- And? How is that related to me being not who I said I am? I am one-handed, just like Ishizue-san. Ah, the difference between left and right hand?

-- I don't know if he has left or right hand missing. It's more about image. Ishizue Arika is the victim. You're too strong to ever think about you as the one who's being killed. And gender is not a matter either, you can change it as much as you want.

-- Wow. So you understood that I'm an impersonator not by the records, but by the image.

I'm too happy, and that's too sad. Yes... you can't get this creature with a fake smile.

-- Hmm, no more questions?.. You're too indifferent somehow. If so, I would want to fulfill Shinya-san's last wish.

-- Forget it. It's you and me talking right now. And then again, it's the last time. I'm asking and you're answering. When we can't do it anymore - curtains down.

-- Mmm... Okay, that's fine too. The outcome will be same anyway.

Karyou-san understands it perfectly that whether to obey me or to protest me or whatever - matters not in the end. The talk was long, but no one will come to this underground room. Maybe he'll have guests on this exact day, but in that case I'll make him win as much time as possible for me. It's revenge for ignoring me up until now. Feel my weird mood.

-- Okay, continuing then. What did Shinya tell you yesterday?

-- Nothing about you. Quoting: "I don't know anything about Makina, so I'll tell you about myself". The talk was about the past of Hisaori Makina, and he wanted me to tell you what I think about it.

And so I listen to the long story, told by Hisaori Shinya.

Hisaori Makina's story from Shinya's mouth, even from my viewpoint, was correct.

Childhood, when I wasn't noticing that I'm different from other kids.

Stairs that I misstepped on in fifth grade. How I was considered an autistic from the middle school, and how I was reborn in second grade, imitating someone else's way of life.

How I appeared to be possessed. How I was imitating Shinya's habits, gestures, from the way of thinking to learning ability and physical development. How, even more standing out among homo sapiens with her manner of face articulation, Hisaori Makina, while being a creature dependent on the memories about others' images, could become even people whose faces were of a completely different structure, according to Shinya's deduction.

-- I underestimated Shinya, he did great. Everything's right.

-- Yup. That is your neoformation. Possibly the smallest among all other possessed ability, not obstructing the character development. But it's insignificant compared to you today. Your anomaly is not related to possession. It's just a trifle thing in description of Hisaori Makina of today.

He's right. Imitation, pfft... If I want to, I can play anyone. I'm just a born actress. Something was broken in me before I got possessed.

-- So what? Shinya told you that, and what did you think? That I'm an ordinary possessed that just watched how her parents die and drove her brother crazy?

-- Yes. Your mind is abnormal, you're possessed, you used your parents to drive your brother crazy. That's all you need to know about Hisaori case. I don't think anyone's at fault. If you judge by the conclusion - you're right. Because your plan to expose Hisaori Shinya to ostracism succeeded.

-- You know what... Stop sucking up to me. I don't want to get disappointed in you. No matter how you look at it, I'm...

-- Sorry, but if you want a punishment, you need to ask a specialist. Good and evil are switching places nowadays, while I won't be able to move from here and I won't be able to punish anyone.

-- So from your viewpoint, Kaie, I'm not guilty?

-- I don't like the very fact you're possessed, but I don't really hate you.

Oh. So he doesn't care?

-- But you need to hear something. Let's say Hisaori Makina's actions were right.

But you're absolutely wrong at one point. That's all Shinya-san's story gave me. I get goosebumps. I'm standing still cool, twisting my mouth in a smile:

-- Where? What point am I wrong at? That I killed my parents? That because of that Shinya-san avenged them and almost destroyed me?

-- You're foolish, Hisaori-san. *I'm talking about you getting a goal.* That I got a... goal?..

-- And, for Shinya-san's good name, I can add that he wasn't mad at you. Just like you felt nothing towards Shinya-san, Shinya-san thought only about himself when he came here. Don't be delusioned there, okay?

It becomes even less clear. Shinya wasn't mad at me and came here not for revenge?

-- You're lying. Shinya hated me.

-- That was before the clinic. Yes, three years ago Shinya-san hated you. Because your imitation was flawed. If you wanted to, you could be identical to him, but you went one step ahead of the original. You could become multiple times as good as Hisaori Shinya, but you intentionally froze at one point.

-- As a result, - he continued, - you, while being Hisaori Shinya for everyone, became artificial, ignoring the existence of the real Hisaori Shinya. You could as well have no evil intentions, but from the viewpoint of the imitated it is an act of absolute aggression. He, as Hisaori Shinya, had to resort to self-defense. He hated you only when he needed to defend himself. But during these three years Shinya-san understood that hate is fruitless. That he has to hit Hisaori Makina. He realized that to return the stolen himself, he'll have to fight you.

Kaie smiled:

-- Because you have different abilities.

What the hell... It's so unclear, that I'm getting angry even more. No, it's already time to finish him off.

-- Yep. It was good for him that he didn't jump at me, but in the end - what, that damned event? Well, for Shinya it was a good move, I guess. He actually got me cornered. So, who gave him the idea? You, Kaie?

Shinya came here for an advice. He relied on a demon in a basement, that, people say, kills possessed.

If so, I was cornered not by Shinya...

-- No. I already told you, I couldn't give him any advice. Whatever I told him, *he kept on imitating you.*

-- Huh? Imitated... me?

-- Yes, in your manner of imitating other people's actions. When half a year ago Hisaori Shinya got discharged from a psychiatric clinic, he took your experience into account and acted like you. Firstly he wanted to get into small crimes from the name of Hisaori Makina, and direct the retribution at you and himself, I think. But you were acting as Ishizue Arika after you got discharged, right? Shinya somehow found it out afterwards, he got surprised, but understood that it's how it was going to be. "As expected from Hisaori Makina", something among these lines. And then he amended his plans. He decided to destroy both your newly made Ishizue Arika's personality and human rights of Hisaori Makina at the same time. Because if either is alive, you will flee to their skin. Yesterday's lynch. It was directed against Ishizue Arika after all. Because if I don't remember it, it means that the other Ishizue Arika did something wrong, and that was the case.

-- Ahh. Damn Shinya, did who knows what from Ishizue-san's name. But... Could that timid Shinya do something like that?

-- He could use his predecessors' experience. His goal only made trouble. If you don't think about your personal profit, anyone can spit poison.

That makes sense. Damn Shinya, he probably threw a lot of money into that. He had the parents' insurance, I think.

-- And the yesterday's news were strange. Isn't it too unnatural to give the name "Hisaori Makina" before police does? You can perceive it as the fact that the information was bought before Shinya-san's corpse was found. I don't think he had an accomplice, so Shinya-san could make a call himself, for example. Before his death he said that his killer is Hisaori Makina.

-- I can't believe it... Don't tell me that damn Shinya...

-- Exactly. When I asked him about how is he going to take his revenge out on Makina, he answered that if he can't win, he won't even fight, and that he'll have to kill his emotions. But I guess he didn't have the patience to kill emotions

alone.

-- ...

What's that, suicide now? You can't say it so simply. It's harder to commit suicide than to defeat me!..

-- That's it about Shinya-san's case. He committed a suicide, only the criminal is left. But you know, Hisaori-san. He acted out his revenge wonderfully great, but he still has no motive. Hisaori Shinya died, but Hisaori Makina was the killer...

Whatever you say, you're the one who did it, and the criminal is you.

Is he delirious? I didn't do anything, and I'm being treated like a possessed that killed her brother. No matter how you look at it, Shinya did it.

-- Stop teasing me. I was just set up. Why... You're cruel, Kaie. If you knew that, why didn't you save me?

-- Because it was impossible. Neither of us could stop Hisaori Shinya.

You're lying. Shinya could easily be stopped.

-- Y-you probably wouldn't be able to. But me! If you told me about that yesterday, and...

-- And you wouldn't be able to either. You have enough ability to outdo him, but you have no energy to oppose him. When you found out about it yesterday, you weren't able to blur the differences between you two, right?

Yesterday Hiasori Shinya couldn't stop the imitation that Hisaori Shinya started three years ago.

Karyou added that Shinya, until yesterday, was exactly as strong. That his imitation was way worse than mine, and way more amazing.

-- However skillfully the play was set, it pales before naturalness. Hisaori Shinya was a third rate actor, but his fervor was genuine. You understand? Without having any goal to show someone else's development - that job in itself is close to self-torture. How long a fantasy can be based on the stranger you just passed by? A human that has his own "I" wouldn't even last five minutes. Imitation requires a lot of fuel.

-- What?

I can't agree to that.

How can it be? I never once thought it was hard.

-- Yes. You are *immediately opposing to that*, you probably can't understand it. The life of a human that never once touched you can be imagined. Where anyone else would give up, Hisaori Shinya got stubborn and did it with his all. Three years ago you left him without a place in life, and he was thinking, without one second of rest. Without entertainment, without distractions, he used all his time to imitate someone else. Not you, loving to imitate. A *normal* human, that can barely think of imitating someone else, parted with all other ideas and completely got his whole self into it. The stubbornness and effort are unimaginable. When people talk about *inhuman energy*, it's about him. From the other side - here's a day, week, month, year, and all that time person was spending in thought; and you were *just* floating with the flow of other person's life. Can you stop it? Hardly.

-- ...

I got a chill.

Either because of the fear of crescent smile of Karyou-san, or from Shinya's energy. Even though I don't care about his stubbornness... that three-year long voluntary reclusion reminded me of myself.

Oh yes... If Shinya became like I was back then, then it's true, you can't stop him in a day... In, hmm... Four days at least.

-- So, if I wanted to stop him, yesterday was already not enough?

-- Yes. Also, Shinya-san's method was flawless. You can use a lot of ways to stop a plan about saving oneself, but a plan where you are not saving yourself can not be stopped. Suicide is the most ineffective, but realizable plan. Hisaori Shinya, whose life was already killed, decided to sacrifice his existence to kill the life of Hisaori Makina.

Enough. Shut up. Don't talk, stop! Of course, if he's going to kill himself on a roadside somewhere, I can't stop him.

-- And still. With all that - a suicide...

But I can't understand one thing. One is afraid of what one can't understand. And I'm feeling a real threat from Shinya right now.

Because I couldn't choose that method. I understood that an end like that wouldn't cause anyone trouble, but I was afraid even to think about it. Shinya,

who did it without any fear, was stronger than me?..

-- But Shinya was so timid that he couldn't kill even me.

And a person like that was able to commit a suicide?

Suicide - it hurts, right? Whether you're healthy or possessed, doesn't matter.

Soul always keeps on doing anything it can to prevent death of its container, isn't that right?

-- Was Shinya speaking normally? He was discharged after all, so he should've been normal.

-- Who knows. I don't know what illness did Hisaori Shinya have. I guess that if he recovered to normal thinking, he wouldn't kill himself. But you, looking from the other side, what do you think? How did Hisaori Shinya cure his psychosis? That's the question. Karyou-san said that my plan succeeded. Shinya was ostracized, and even stranger is the fact that he recovered. Dead men usually don't rise, as the world hints.

-- Yes. Hisaori Shinya's mind was completely destroyed, thanks to you. He wanted to die that same moment. But his wish for revenge didn't let him do that. Hisaori Shinya couldn't die without defeating you. And even if he died, Hisaori Shinya wouldn't disappear. He would want to die, but he wouldn't be able to. And then he, wishing only for death, decided to return his sanity back, for the sake of getting to the last station. He didn't become sane and died, but he turned back to normal to die. You can say he switched his mind. Speaking poetically, Hisaori Shinya sold his soul to devil for the sake of crushing Hisaori Makina.

-- ...

Even if our abilities were different, we really were alike, like brother and sister. Shinya probably didn't rise with his own powers. My "only mistake" made birth to this revenge.

-- To defeat me to die himself?.. Ha-ha. Yeah, that's surely not because of hate. Hey, Kaie. Was my mistake not like Shinya's?

-- In a different order, but it was the same. There was only one mistake. Three years ago you, for the first time voluntarily, imitated Hisaori Shinya not as a goal, but as means. It wasn't like that before. You, partly from the interest, used the means to exist as means to entertainment.

"Never before I thought of anything as fun.

I tried to take your place, Shinya, and it seems to be *entertaining*."

Ahh. So that's what it was about.

-- Your imitation was correct because it was a goal in itself. As it was the ending stage, *nothing came out of it*. But you used imitation as means to push your brother from his chair. And means always get a goal - the result.

"Stupid... Bye-bye, Shinya."

I admit it. I had fun. Even when I jumped from the balcony, Shinya's teary face was bringing me delight. As I said myself - when I was put into clinic, it was a punishment for my only sin.

-- I get it. So the me of the past took revenge on me.

Exactly so.

The young man in the underground blooms with a smile.

Looks like I hurt myself.

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-- Ehh... I was stupid.

The decision to come here was the worst, but at the same time the best.

Suddenly, my downfall is clear. Everything is now clear in my head, and a lot is now unimportant.

Yeah. Enough, enough grasping for the past and wasting my nerves. Hisaori Makina always uses her head for different things.

-- That is all that Shinya-san asked me. So, what are you going to do now? You can either run or give yourself up. If you give up, you probably shouldn't be getting any aggravating circumstances to it.

Aggravating? How about yesterday's minors? Nothing, someone saved them.

Probably. What Shinya-san was doing from Ishizue-san's name will return back to Shinya.

-- Oh, and to finish that off. They say Ishizue-san got discharged yesterday. I think he's in the dormitory by now?

It's okay. I don't need him anymore.

I take the knife from my back pocket.

I jerk from the feeling of a hard item in my hand. Blood is pulsating in my irremovable white right hand. What am I going to do? Return to clinic? Not bad, but that won't do anymore, Karyou-san. Now I know the place where I feel better than there, and wishing for better is natural.

-- Listen. I want a next object for copying.

That is probably first plea I ever made to anyone.

-- What?..

Still laying down, *it* looks at me. Can't run without hands or legs. And so, it has come to this.

-- Yes. So, can you please die?

My hand twitched happily. The dog of hate is silent.

-- Why? If you want to play me, just go and live as you lived somewhere, where no one knows about you. You don't need to become an original. Or Hisaori Makina works in some other way?

-- Well, yeah. You see, there is no room like that anywhere else. And you, Karyou-san, are amazingly rich.

-- Well, let's say so, I have the money. What, you want to kill me, cut your limbs off and sit here? You can't substitute me like that.

-- No, I can... Yes, there will be some discomfort. Well, I'll kill you and then think...

There are a lot of means. I just want this room. I don't need the original. And also...

-- How to say... It's like you set me up, isn't it?

Or this reasonless wish to kill and happiness come from my admiration of him?

I thrust the knife down. The world around me falls away. I am killed before I

kill. My limbs are instantly surrounded by darkness.

-- Hey, wow, what the hell!..

And I - *whoosh*.

From the ashy space, I hear the tenth wave coming.



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-- Ah? About prosthesis, we were talking this morning?

On Shikura's outskirts, in one of the forests, there is a water reservoir that is not marked on a map. Deeper under it there is an underground room that no one knows about.

-- Well that's, you know... Mato-san, you are surprisingly... well...

Romantic - hell, I can't say that. Be it through the telephone, this is still Evil Tomato, and she'll tear my eardrums even from a thousand kilometers distance. Absolutely.

-- I also find it funny, but I'm not joking. Got it? I'll tell you the address now, deal with it today.

I check the address with a map. I am now in telephone booth next to building number 13. To come to that place, I need to come back to Shikura hill, and then walk the fields on its outskirts.

-- Hm? There's quite a house here, Mato-san... How do you even read these kanji? Ehh, Ka... ryou?

-- I don't know how old is your map, but that mansion was demolished ages ago. It's still private property, but they know about your arrival, so don't worry.

-- Got it. If I go there now, I'll be there by evening, how is the owners' mood?

-- *That* is always in good mood, especially after sunset. And then, Shouzai. When you're done, don't forget to call me.

-- Aha... Okay, and if the communication fails, should I call too? I thought you didn't like pointless calls.

-- This time is special. Doesn't matter what hour. It's a matter of life and death, so to say. If I wouldn't know if you're alive or dead, sake would taste bad.

"See ya", the phone call awkwardly ends.

Apparently, Mato-san's fairy tale was authentic.

Clouds cleared, high starry sky, yellow warm summer moon.

Huge, cubical reservoir, on it - a heavy steel door. Door is unlocked. Stairs and a narrow passageway lead underground. No lights at all. I blindly walk down, through the passageway, I come to a door and open it. Inside it was a narrow and pressuring, torn away from reality room, like in a castle. Ceiling is an aquarium, moon swaying inside it.

-- Good evening, excuse me...

I enter the obviously unpleasant underground room... If I were mentally healthy, I would've ran away right away, but unfortunately my carefulness circuits are disabled.

In the middle of a room, there is a curtained bed. Next to it, for some reason, lay a fruit knife.

-- Yes-yes, it's great that you were able to come here at this late hour. Are you Ishizue Arika-san?

Transparent eyes look at me from the bed. Their owner, lit by moon, was undoubtedly a woman, incredibly gorgeous.

-- Ah. Yes, the real one has white hair, - happily exclaimed the black-haired beauty. It's a kid, so a girl.

A huge beast, looking like a dog - where was it hiding? - noisily sniffing my legs, greeted a new guest.

-- Good evening. Are you Karyou-san? Thing is, I heard you have excellent arm prostheses.

-- Yes, I do. Not so many, but I have some rare ones. They all choose the person though... You're in luck, Ishizue-san, looks like they'll fit you fine.

"Bark bark!" - cheerfully barked the black dog. Looks like it's good-natured, I thought and froze in place.

-- Hey, what are you...

The owner of a room, laying on bed, wasn't a usual being. It wasn't about not having limbs. Every cell inside me turned upside down from a horrible chill. Even in clinic I didn't feel such a... threat, coming from the little child before me.

-- Are you even human?..

It wonderingly opened its eyes. The incredibly beautiful face made a smile:

-- Finally, the image fits. Glad to make your acquaintance, Ishizue Arika. My name is Karyou Kaie. Hmm, yeah. You can't play a personality with just face alone.

-- What?

The unknown creature said a weird greeting.

That's the story about a weirdo I met right after discharge.

Next is the story about forming a bond with the Underground Devil, a bond that you literally can't cut even with a knife.

\Hide and Self.

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-- And that's what happened, and in the end you came here, Arika. That's the story about the mimicking possessed Hisaori Makina.

-- You're telling it like a fairy tale.

August. Almost a month has passed since this Hisaori Makina's case was over. The sun set, Karyou Kaie's basement got colder, the complicated and boring story finally ended.

-- And I don't even know Hisaori at all, only by the records. If you ask me what she was like, I wouldn't be able to give you an evening of recollections, as you like it.

When Kaie is very hungry, he begs for clinic stories as a consolation. I guess he started talking about Hisaori intentionally, wishing to ask about her life in confinement.

-- What? I don't need it. I just wanted you to think, because Hisaori Makina's story is important to you. I don't find it interesting at all.

-- I thought you like all possessed.

-- Depends on a scale. You, for example, wouldn't like a steak that is less than two hundred gramm weight, right? Her neoformation too was so little that it didn't matter.

I didn't see a steak from since I was discharged. It's been a month from when I took on a job of looking after Kaie. When will he give me my first salary, bastard?

-- And, how am I related to Hisaori story?

-- Hisaori Makina was imitating you, and she's one of the few discharged. And then again you, Arika, are not yet used to life here. I thought you could use a story of someone who has been discharged half a year before you.

-- Could use it?.. Hmm. And what about her guilt? Is she still considered Shinya's killer?

-- Mm? No, they found out that Hisaori Shinya committed a suicide. Her last

accusation about A-syndrome carrier's abilities was flushed through information bureau. It appears she ran away from her inspector and now is considered missing in action. Really, *where did she go, I wonder?*

-- Good for her... If I did that, I would probably come afloat in a reservoir like that next day.

-- If you go running away from Mato-san, run to the opposite direction from here, alright? Don't spoil my water.

So it is. Where did she go is unknown, but Hisaori got lucky. If you're not in Mato-san's paws, you would at least be able to live.

-- Hmm. Are you envious of Hisaori Makina?

Kaie mysteriously smiles, and looks at me. Ugh. I'm used to it, but I still get nervous. Don't scare me! /That/, even though it's so attractive that I'm at loss of words, is still a guy, god damn.

-- No. I just thought about how she strained everyone. And anyway, what's with that imitation stuff. You need to see other people's lives, and that's it. No need to think about it all the time.

Hisaori Makina doesn't pass for a possessed.

People have enough problems on their own. People remember only the superficial details about others, and can't even think about what's going on inside. And they don't need to.

She, on the other hand, caught everything about others in precision. Hisaori Shinya, with his persistence, made his own "imagining and replay of someone else's life", while she was doing it subconsciously, monster. Hypertrophied imagination, so to say. That's why she was obsessed with all those sticky ideas like "nothing works out well". Everything for her worked out fine, balancing to a zero. Big successes had big failures to contrast, a healthy life, actually.

Even though she doesn't realize it, she was probably a perfect girl for everyone in her childhood. Her main mistake wasn't the possession and not even the intellect she was born with. There is "being liked by everyone", and there is "doing everything so that as many people as possible wouldn't love you". These two are completely opposite ways of life, and she thought they are the same...

-- Good for you. Hum, hum. From that quality of yours I feel uneasy.

-- And I'm uneasy from your formulations like those.

I don't want to get into Nishijima-chan's league. And I don't want to see that face, having fun using others, okay? Look at him, all amused.

-- If you're so good, Arika, then I have a question for you. If you ever imitate anyone, why would it be?

Is he mocking me? He didn't ask "who", he asked "why".

-- Who knows. I didn't ever try it... Well, probably out of admiration or trying to be the same?

Becoming an original - it's, you know... Hisaori Makina was always surrounded by fake smiles, that's why she tried to become the original one.

-- Nah. If you wanted to become original one, the talk would be easier. I'm just talking about when it's enough to become like someone. No need to especially imitate.

So it's not about the admiration? That means...

-- Ahh... Too lazy to think for yourself, so you act like someone else?

So he's talking about when you don't want to think for yourself. When you're mechanically copying someone.

-- Yes. That was the true essence of Hisaori Makina. She was thoroughly thinking about someone else's life, and in result she stopped thinking.

-- Probably, - he continued, - her thinking worked the opposite way. We with you move through our lives, changing all sorts of priorities in our mind. Compare it with a car. And she begins with a spring start. That which will require years for us, she thinks about at first, and then starts to move. For example, imitating Hisaori Shinya. Every morning she starts a thinking spring named "Hisaori Shinya" for just some minutes, and then she continues playing another person. If you talk about an energy that is used for that, even among possessed she's one of the best. If she used it correctly, she could do anything she wanted.

-- I don't get it. What's the point of doing that?

-- Like I said - *she's only thinking to be able to stop thinking*. Like a real wind-up mechanism. I don't know what other problems are coming up with that, but if Hiasori Makina didn't imitate anyone, she couldn't have any dreams or hopes. Kaie's words have a false bottom.

Dreams and hopes of Hisaori - that's somehow plain, not about it. Hisaori Makina had to erase herself to be able to live at all - like that.

-- ...

What a troublesome life. She was living for suffering, so to say.

-- Ah, where are you going? The important talk has just begun. If you want to know why I started to talk about Hisaori Makina...

-- No need. Leave it until the better times. Tsuranui and Eda are waiting for me. I part with the only treasure of this basement, the sofa that is so comfy to sleep at. The talk was dark, but yeah, I had what to think about. It's been a month since I got discharged. Looks like Hisaori Makina reminded me, from the inside, about a vector in this life I've been accepting in all its haziness.

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-- Hello, is this Ishizue Arika-san?

-- Yes, Ishizue here, who is that?

-- It's me... Long-time no see. How are you?

-- Not bad. How about you?

-- Thanks for asking. My right hand hurts a bit, but I'm fine. Well, thanks to it, I'm now a level higher. Cool, right? If I have a chance, I'll play you even better, Ishizue-san.

-- What? Possessed get level ups? With what? Bread or blood?

-- Enlightenment and talent - so I think. You need both, otherwise you can't. And you have neither, Ishizue-san. Well, you're not possessed anyway.

-- Well, that's good. But what was that? You're not interested in me.

-- Obviously. I don't care about you at all. I don't need to imitate you. I just can't live otherwise.

-- Where did I hear that... Are you heavily ill? Or maybe you're even dying. Then again, these behavioural patterns are a necessary state for you guys.

-- Well, so to say - yes, I'm dying. And you, Ishizue-san, didn't go too far from me. Are you always that heartless?

-- Why would I want to get familiar? "I just can't live otherwise", it isn't funny. All your system is upside down. Life is a life because you're already living. Every goal is ahead.

-- So it's not like that for you?

-- No. Thanks to you, I understood it clearly. I want to live as easily as I can. Requiring a reason to show my will? No thanks.

-- Heh. You're weird, Ishizue-san. You were pessimist before. Well, doesn't matter. I have other things to do now. You have the evening papers, right? Don't throw them away, check them out. Couldn't last for half a year, but there are some useful things there.

-- Report?.. Hey, what's this here about picking food and counting calories, and about manga to buy? How is that useful?

-- Maybe a try on clinging? Ah, but it didn't help at all, there probably will be no results. Damn it. Why am I even doing it?

-- That's what I asked. Why are you calling me?

-- Last wish of Karyou-san, that's it. How can I not fulfill it. Oh, and you got a message from your sister. "I'll become stronger and come out, so don't get yourself killed, brother". Alright, bye-bye, Ishizue-san.

-- Yeah, bye-bye. By the way, who are you?

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-- Boo... You forgot in the end, stupid.

I clicked my tongue and left the telephone booth.

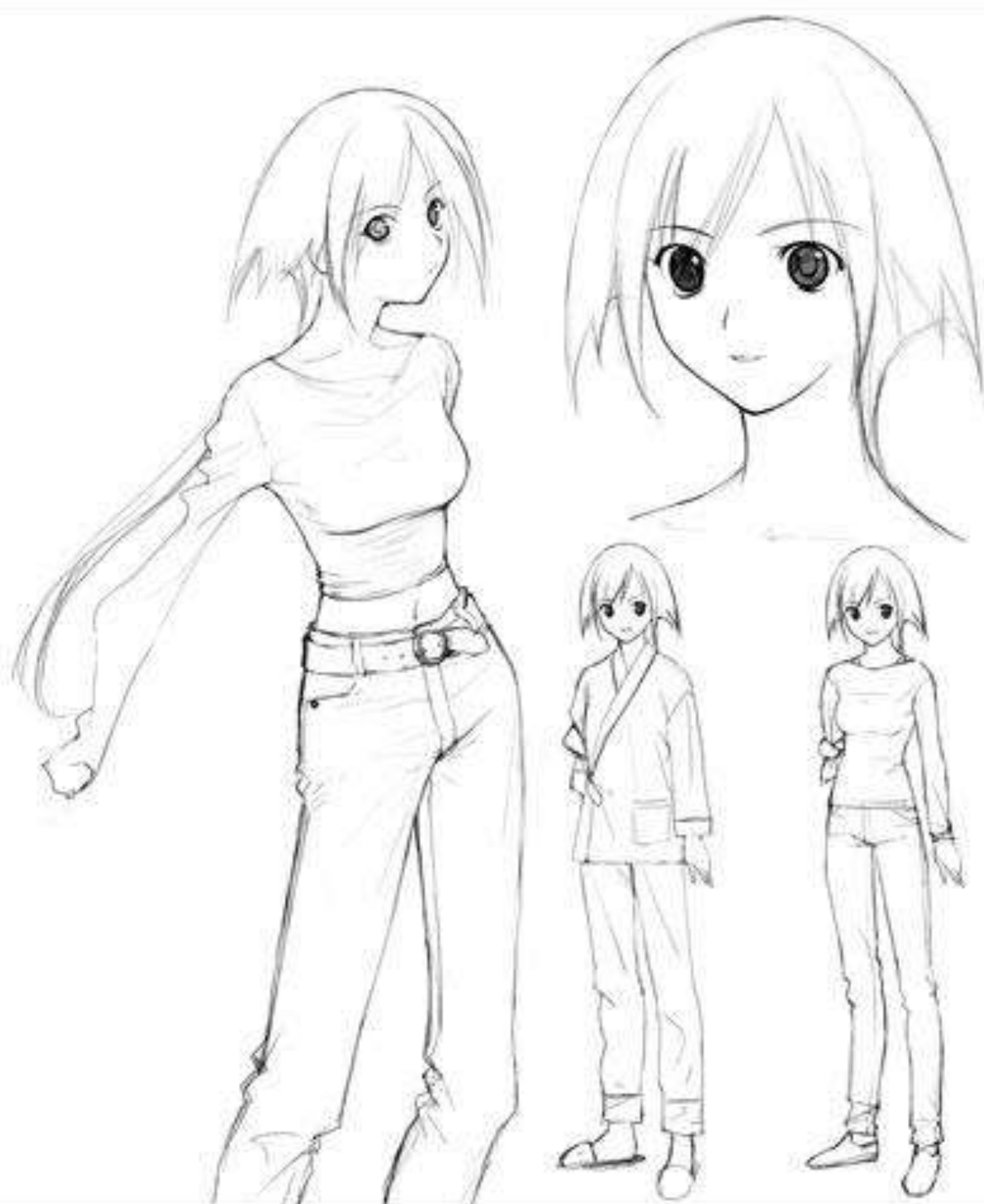
I paid my debts. But I was sad, because the main part, from Yamada... it's an alias, I guess... I couldn't say.

Knows about Ishizue-san just as much as he himself does. Ishizue Arika in my head stepped on a landmine in the end. And if it wasn't my mistake in imitation, their friendship wouldn't last long.

-- I guess that's earlier, before his sister kills him. Hold on for a year, Ishizue-san.

Time to throw it out of my head. If I start thinking by myself, I'm done for. I silently start the spring.

Well, no time to be nitpicking. I'll start from a completely random stranger.



\3.5\Self (R)

And I - *whoosh*.

From the ashy space, I hear the tenth wave coming.

*

It attacked all my body at once. As if I jumped into fire. All my skin, all my muscles and intenal organs were attacked by an acid rain. Like I was ground by a huge mixer from head to toes.

-- E-e-e-eh... A-a-a-a-ah!

Torture, close to pleasure. I couldn't even moan.

With my eyes, cut into little cubes, I watch the ashy sunlight, falling on small pieces, and sea, and three days old moon, and a phantom of a big fish swimming across the room.

-- A-a-ahh... Ah?..

Yeah, the phantom.

I wasn't melted or ground.

I lift my head up - still the same reservoir, and no sign of the fallen sea. No signs of wetness on floor or walls. But, be it funny or scary, I'm completely drenched.

-- Hey... Just now, the glass... broke?

-- Glass?

Limbless child questioningly tilts his head.

We with him have different perceptions. I thought about glass and water, and he probably has *different names for it*.

-- I see, "Sorrow" didn't like you. Ahh. You're in his saliva for a while now anyway.

Ashy rays darken. A huge fish appears in the reservoir over my head. Its shadow, like an eye, looks at me.

-- Ha... ha... What's that fish, looks completely like that phantom?.. I got it. Yeah. And I thought it's not like that.

Anyway, it's not a question of how fish lives in the water, transparent like air.
There is no fish like that in any encyclopaedia.

-- Hey. Was I wrong again?

I don't think I can kill him. At least in this dungeon, he's invincible. That's why he will be the killer. You only stretch your hand, and a counterattack will come, that's the natural theory.

-- Aha. I am disappointed, Hisaori Makina. Play me as much as you want. But who gave you this foolish idea that you can't be real if the original still exists?
I drop my knife on the ground. Still like a wet mouse that parted with life, I listen to Karyou-san's scolding.

-- And anyway, replacing the original one is not imitation. You have to imitate the successful ones, and that is your goal in itself. If you will become the original one, who are you going to imitate?

He's right. I can flawlessly imitate someone, but if he dies, then it's not an imitation, it's a recording. If I imitate someone that doesn't exist anymore, it will be only me, Hisaori Makina, inheriting the existence.

-- I guess. I shouldn't sit in the chair, I have to just look at it. Sorry, I'll keep that in mind. Can you forgive me this once?

-- Okay. You're not at fault that he didn't like you. Now our killing score is even.

-- Uhh...

I sigh in relief. Whatever it was, I need to run away from here. My legs are still shaking. I still am not allowed to look at this chair.

-- Well, farewell. Your job is over.

Oh yeah, I need to return this hand that is glued hard to me.

-- Hmm, Kaie, about this prosthesis...

-- Ah, this one. You can have "Delight" for a while. You're going to have it hard, and you never can have enough useful hands, right?

-- Are you sure? I won't come back to return it.

-- It's okay. I'll substitute it with Hate for now, so I'll make it somehow. And even if you won't come back, it will come back by itself when you die.

My legs started shaking even more. Creepy. I love him, after all!

-- Better tell me, do you have any plans already? If you need money, I can give

you a bonus for all that time.

-- Nah. No problems with money. I still have Shinya's inheritance. And then.. well, I'll be on the run, but it's hard to get out of this prefecture. Even impossible. I guess I'll hide in the town until everything calms down.

I walk to the exit. If I decided to run, I should start right away. I can't imagine police barging into here, but an acquaintance of Karyou-san, the inspector, can come.

-- Ah, wait. One more thing. When everything settles down, can you call Ishizue Arika?

-- Why?

That's somehow surprising. Now I need to call Ishizue-san - since when did he start to ask me for impossible things?

-- You worked here for half a year. Giving your successor the work is your duty and responsibility.

Karyou-san smiles. Just like during our first meeting, the naive first-class smile. I exit the dungeon. The job talk is over.

-- Sigh...

I didn't tell him anything after all.

I want him to know, but it's not in my power now. I walk the deserted forest, and suddenly remember the six months old dialogue. About how - *bang* - the gym was shaking. About the promising newbie in D building, younger sister of Ishizue-san, and about what happened then.

-- Hey. What do you think about possessed? That we are all sick and need to be isolated? We can't live normally, that means we're very weak.

The black-haired beauty, which was, to say, younger than me, looked at me amazedly, like her brother did before.

-- I never once thought that way. But if you speak about power, we are strong for sure. And we're all tough nuts.

Bang. Like in a nightmare, the sandbag flies up to ceiling. Eight meter long chain and a sixty kilogram weight screech and bend.

-- What's so tough? Well, if you look at you, you are tough, but...

-- Not physically, but mentally. Both you and me are tough. We're fine with

death of our relatives or isolation, we're too thick-skinned. So thick-skinned that we don't care about a lot of things.

Bang. The hitting fist slightly gave off murderous intent.

Possession, they say, is a brain tumor, that appears because of mental weakness. And you're saying it appears over it.

-- But... it's hard. We can't take our indifference as much as we have it. We have no problems. We're a bother to everyone while aren't bothered by anything. But we still want, without any reason, to change ourselves.

"While we could just not care", - she laughs and happily kicks the bag. Suffering and happiness. She obviously loved herself like that.

-- By the way, why are you doing this?

-- Hmm, this? Well, it's not to chill...

Touma Mato caught her and dragged her to this clinic.

Now she has an awful wound. Not a physical one, a mental wound. As an animal she obviously ran away, but she was ground into mincemeat. Letting her guard down and relaxing from being special, she lost to a usual human.

-- Well, what can you do. We only exhaust our mind, we didn't train our special abilities or body. And so I thought I should fix that. To tell the truth, I can leave here even now. But I need to change a bit more, or else I won't be able to fight that woman.

Bang, ding-g. The last, finishing middle-kick sends bag into the wall, and it doesn't come back.

-- Yeah... She's something, that girl.

There are no possessed as optimistic as her, I guess. Back then I thought my difference was a weak point and ignored everything, but now I understood it and agreed. A human being needs self-appraisal.

-- I found a perfect chair. I was very careful, but it didn't work out well.

I thought it's okay, but it's better if I train too. I was too reliant on the talent. If I

want to change, then I should do it thoroughly. Only changing the interior world won't do. I'll get a new spring. To mimic the outside as well, to be no one and anyone, to become a winded mechanism.

Feh. Now you'll see, you little bastard.

\Hide and Self. end

From the name and by request of Underground Devil I spend a couple of hours watching the stop. After Makina left, I unhurriedly walk to a residential area and enter room 303, where is nothing now.

Strangely, the room that was once a kitchen is now crimson-colored. On the narrow balcony, visible from the window, hugging her knees and calling for help was a phantom of small Makina, who was a goddess back then.

-- Ahh...

Crimson, which was probably looking sad three years ago, now got the shine of a glass of holiday wine. Ah, so shining. It hurts so much. What's with the "human is burning"! The little sister is the one burning...

-- But sorry, Makina. Just with you coming here, I won.

I sit in the kitchen and put the stolen knife to my throat. Last moments. Three years old events flash before my eyes.

"Learn from your sister".

"Shinya, you're copying your sister too much".

No. No, no, no. She's the copy, those manners are mine. I'm Shinya, she's the false one, people, listen, I'm the real one!!

-- Oh...

I hear the echo of my own scream. It is also over. Maybe with my way of thinking nothing will work out well for me, but that method will set things straight.

Because Makina was the one who taught me that. If you want to remove someone from this world, just sacrifice yourself. Finally, I defeated the demon.

My palm pressed into the handle. Pain and ceasing to exist do not frighten me.

Those are not result, those are means. Moreover, the relief comes earlier.

The room is still crimson, no matter where you look.

In the end, I return myself to me.

That's it... Bye-bye, Shinya.



3.

formal hunt.

disconnection
isorder

I don't care if there is not much time left.
And I don't care that future is already here.

For me...
Things that couldn't be stopped were the proof of speed.

/formal hunt.

1/

Two years earlier, end of 2003.

Brother doesn't know that, but our family are murderers.
And the truth is that I, as a part of it, also hide a killer demon within myself.

The very northern part of prefecture C, a bit to the east. Here, two hours ride on express train away from the main center, is the Shikura town. Its population is only 15 thousand people. Tourists don't come here. It's a typical provincial town, separated from the nearest railroad station by five kilometers of fields and hills. If from the center of the town you walk north, then on the hill's slope you'll find another area of Shikura. It's a residential area, but it's pretty quiet here. Wide and cozy streets are covered with earth, but unfortunately no flowers grow next to houses. Two story high buildings stand in a single row, many of them are over ten years old.

There are not many young people here, but for families renting apartments here it's cheaper to get complex ones.

In this area you can feel the difference between welfare of different classes,

taking some of the buildings for an example.

The intermediate position is taken by the average class, which, not without hardships, possesses buildings on their own.

I live in fourth building of the residential area of Shikura. It's rather quiet and boring here, but in five minutes bicycle ride from here you can find stores, bookshop, and cafe.

I feel myself especially nice on an autumn morning. That time always comes peacefully in a spontaneous environment.

-- Hey, Tomori! It's time to go!

-- Sorry, I didn't eat my breakfast yet, go on without me.

I sent my brother ahead.

Actually, I was embarrassed to go to school with him, but I never could say it straight, so I used tricks like that.

-- Okay, I'm off then. You wake up earlier tomorrow, and don't stay up too late.

Brother is not too sharp and doesn't suspect anything, so he just went before me. And I, after lying to him, kept on taking my time and drinking weak coffee.

The name "Tomori" is a rare one, only a handful of people have it - I guess I can be proud being among them. It's not as attractive as "Hanako Reuko", but it's easy to remember and easy to write. When teachers first see the name I write, they say something like "I never saw such an empty and uninteresting name!". Though... sometimes I think that myself.

My brother says: "You have a weird name, but you're a beauty", and I believed that until the elementary school. Recently I got curious, and I decided to ask him what's so beautiful in me. "Something from Japanese doll, something from a rabbit... Yeah, that cool." He said that after two minutes of thinking.

What? Where did he get that monster from?

Japanese doll plus rabbit... That's something like a fox? What about me trying to keep up with fashion or being proud of my black hair?..

Well, whatever. I finished my coffee and got up. I should hurry to school.

-- Wait, Tomori! Come back earlier today. Father wants to talk to you.

-- Okay. About what?

-- Same as always. He wants to make sure you were a good girl.

Mother smiled widely. Same as always, eh?.. That man is definitely crazy. Calls family meetings every time, almost drives me into depression. When will he die already.

-- Got it! I'll be back before seven.

I said, and cheerfully went out.

It was around eight o'clock, I was late. But I wasn't hurrying - I walked the familiar road, looking around.

Walks to school in autumn are a horrible thing. Everything around is painted in unfeeling colors. But as winter comes, the days when I try to avoid other people come to an end, and however unsociable I am, I still have to make contact with them.

October, 2002.

Suddenly it became very noisy around me.

-- Don't tell me nothing will come out of it? - it was the first time in ten years I was that uneasy.

Maybe I shouldn't have worried, but I was waiting that moment for too long.

I took a deep breath, and got filled in autumn smell. That slightly calmed me down. Pedestrians unhurriedly walked the streets. That also gave some peace. It was all so artificial, so fragile, but still somehow amusing.

I tried to calm my breath, but my heart didn't wish to rest and only started beating faster. Maybe I was the one at fault. I was running.

Around two weeks ago I started slowly changing, and Shikura hill got enfolded in a weird atmosphere.

To start with the popular stories, our school has the best batters in baseball. In senior years of Shikura middle school are two baseball monsters, whose talent no one can overcome. One of them is the batter number four. He's one of those people that get into team without any effort and for whom hitting the ball is like a child's play. Flocks of schoolgirls always came to watch his games, even if they didn't know baseball rules.

Still, our baseball club loses every year. And this year makes the third.

If you're curious why this happens, there are two reasons for that. When fourth makes a home run, he throws up. There were rumors that he suffered irritated bowel syndrome, but best batter, finishing his triumph with a throw up, is a really rare sight.

In this season, where he threw up the tenth time, he lost consciousness during the match. Losing its trump card, our school lost. By the way, in the third game among opponents was another genius - pitcher from senior year of Koara-hill middle school. That was the second reason.

Those are the school stories.

In any case, that's how his last summer was remembered. Despite teacher and baseball club saddened by the loss, number four made it look like he didn't care: "So it is in sport, either you win or you lose". Looks like he didn't have competitive spirit in him. And he should pay more mind to what he eats before the game.

Still, I was a bit envious of him. He was my favorite senpai. I always thought he looks like a samurai swinging his katana. I wanted to play with him once.

From this point stories are from the rumors area.

They say that people possessed by demons started appearing on town's streets. There is a guy, not from Shikura, who also came here from northern part of C prefecture, where he was a prisoner. He apparently managed to flee from police

during the relocation, and he hid here. Completely normal story for this place. He was called a vampire-like serial killer, but the best horror stories, of course, tell about our schools. Like about student council president from manga, or about a demon with two right hands.

But actually the story had more truth than fiction.

The runaway possessed is a man with a very old-fashioned name Hinomori Shusei.

Everyone started a ruckus about him being the first possessed, while in fact he was identified long ago, just that his illness started manifesting all of a sudden. It wasn't highlighted in the news, so no one knew about that.

No one remembers the events from two years ago either - two years ago there was an article about a girl with an A-syndrome, possessed.

A boy, who was bullied in school, killed his parents and tried to kill his younger sister, who managed to flee by jumping from a third floor balcony.

But by then she already got A-syndrome infected and was hospitalized.

It appears that she didn't notice that she was possessed. While in the ambulance car, they analyzed brother's blood sample to save the broken right hand, and it was virus positive.

Of course, it's bad to say that, but "How foolish! If it was me, I would..." do everything much better.

Remembering that boring report, I think that it was the case that opened a new path in life for me.

Try out your own powers.

That girl broke the tight chains binding me, which were already smoldering for quite a while.

Though maybe back then I simply got infected.

Mass media was saying that A-syndrome isn't spreading with droplets in air. More like it spreads via some electromagnetic impulses. Some time from the moment of infection start a sudden headache assaults. "Thud-thud-thud" - pulse in the head orders: "Try it! Try it! Try it!"

But I'm such an indecisive person that I didn't right away understand what exactly do I have to try - and so a lot of time was lost.

I only noticed that I'm infected much later - during that year's spring. I had my doubts during the last medical examination, but they got erased after this one. Possession changes the body, that's why I finally got enlightened. My nails got longer, but there were no other changes, though my mouth will probably get wider later. I didn't notice anything else except that.

But that was only my own specific case.

Abilities of my body also suddenly improved. That's natural, but in my case they still were within limits of human body.

Without any unusual symptoms, my illness increased the functionality of my body and got its own "abilities".

I didn't take in medication, because there was no necessity in it. It was a secret no one knew about. Of course I realized that the possession will eventually destroy me, but at that time I thought that everything is going very well. I think I should happily live through that day like everyone else, without troubling anyone.

Classes were coming to an end, sun began to set - my favorite time. Run. Run. Run. Run.

I can't stop hurrying myself today.

Sometimes I look back.

I don't have a goal.

At first I didn't understand anything - there is no human that can like the very process of running. Hurry or goal, chance or result, some profit or meaning. I don't have any of it, I'm a human that just runs.

You could say that any of it would only bother me. How stupid I was trying to think of a reason for running.

-- Am I alright?

That volubility is not like me at all. Something is wrong.

-- Is this normal?

Looks like I'm still worried about the lack of goal.

-- Whatever, it's more fun this way.

And nothing can be done about it.

I think that I should've been born as an animal. For an animal, running is the meaning of life, I don't think they're worried about anything else. It's so simple. If I could become an animal, I wouldn't be worried about pointlessness of my actions.

From roof to roof, from fence to fence...

My movements are just as refined as those of panther or ape.

I jump over two-story buildings in one go. I dash through streets that became a jungle for me. This is so refreshing.

Autumn is the harvesting time.

Most of all I am charmed by lawnmowers.

Jumping down from the roof of a seven story high building, I fly above one story high building and land onto a roof of a six story high one.

I dash ten meters as fast as I can.

I jump two meters up and softly slide another meter after landing.

My long hair is a bit in the way. Feeling naivety... no, innocence and purity come back to me, I enjoy my evening scampers. I'm like an elusive thief on these streets.

Of course, I'm not satisfied with that level. Anyone from our middle school can do it. A first-class athlete has the decisiveness and ability to jump from a ten story high residential building without wavering. Something like that.

It feels like our town is solely populated by acrobats. I'm sure that everyone here has experience with stunts like those.

In my childhood I heard parents ask their kids to get into apartment through a second floor window, because they lost their keys. As time went by, performing stunts like those became harder, children were growing up. That's why they had to refine their abilities and become more agile.

But many people stopped those activities, and main reason was determination. They were afraid to fall, they were afraid to stain their clean clothes... It appears we lost our animal instincts because we obtained intellect. People always try to ensure their own safety, it can't be changed. I managed to notice the chains binding me by pure coincidence. I clearly see the difference between what I can and what I can't.

Of course, that all is thanks to the influence of A-syndrome, so it's a bit unfair. I jump from the roof to ground, I never would be able to do that if I wasn't infected. Now I need to act normally, so no one will find out my secret.

-- Brother noticed my "staying up late", though.

I get up and walk home. Looking around, I throw a glance at the sky. As if drunk, I fall on the ground and take a deep breath.

That's why I love autumn so much.

Only at this time moon is so beautiful.

*

-- I'm home! Oh, brother is home too. Did you get a day off at work?

I join brother in living room. I didn't expect him to be at the family meeting.

-- Yeah. What about you? It's almost seven. Did you have club activities?

-- No-no, I was in karaoke. We heard that today they gave discount to all girls, so we took the opportunity and went there for three hours. But you don't have an ear for music, so do you even care?

Actually, if I started to sing, everyone around would bleed from their ears.

-- Hmm... Do you have pocket money left?

-- Yeah, I still have some. Can I ask you for a different favor instead?

I shyly played with my skirt. Father, waiting for me, will most probably talk about the same topic. I wanted brother to leave home for the meeting time.

-- I get it. So you want me to bring Ishimori-san's notes? But isn't that against the rules?

-- It's just a simple mistake! Names Ishimori and Ishizue start the same. It's all that woman from residential association - she's too old for this.

-- Got it. However old she is, mixing up names is not good.

Puzzled, my brother went to antechamber. And I, leaving my bag on stairs, went to father's room.

-- Welcome home, Tomori. I'm happy you listened to me.

Smiling wide, father told me to sit down. His room had a glass roof, and I always was watching the night sky through it. I completely ignored my parent's words. I am only bothered by the sounds of human voice. Why do human words spoil the surrounding harmony? I never noticed it, but it was always like that.

-- It's bad. Don't you think you're coming late too often? Your mother is worried, and I wanted to talk to you about that too.

His face is radiating with kindness. Just like at that day.

That day, when my grandpa died, my father had the same kind and pacifying look on his face.

When I was five, grandpa became a burden for our family.

In his youth grandpa drank and smoke a lot, burning his life, and in the end, when he got older, he couldn't even get up from his bed because of bad lungs and heart. When he was assaulted with especially strong pain, he moaned. His voice was really deep, that's why the moans from the second floor were clearly heard by me and brother.

During the summer vacation we with brother left to mother's hometown. And then, when I came back home before others (I don't remember why - I think I got bored with village and wanted to watch TV)... When I came home, I heard voices and rustling from grandpa's bedroom, and saw him in person. Grandpa's face was twisted and dried up.

Old people are not good at bearing summer heat. I said that to father right away, but since grandpa's whining was an everyday thing, father told me to ignore it and leave him alone.

He literally said that: "I'm on vacation, that's why I watch him all of time". And patted my shoulder.

Father squeezed his fingers on my shoulder - what did he want from me?

Mother's face was emotionless - as if they wanted me to tell me to ignore grandpa's very existence.

That's how that night passed.

Next morning in grandpa's bedroom we found a corpse, with its dirty and thin hands stretched towards nowhere. If that picture had a name, it would be called "Help me".

Parents' faces got pale, they called an ambulance right away. So many concerned and insincere speeches... They were telling me that his death was inevitable, that we couldn't do anything.

Yes. My family are murderers.

And I am a murderer too.

The only innocent and righteous person in this house was my brother, and I was envious of him.

-- Tomori, are you not hiding anything from me? Something I don't know about. I never hid anything from you, and I want you to do the same, - father said, still with the sugary politeness.

I was looking at the sky.

Father considered me an accomplice.

For the third day in a row, before I left to school, he repeated those words to me. Even during weekends he called me to talk about it.

Every day the same.

-- I'm happy that you're behaving well. Of course, your mother had doubts, but she didn't want to keep you in the dark. She's already strictly watching you, because you're a cute girl.

I was looking at the moon.

Mother considered me an accomplice.

Sad thing is, talking on that topic is always forbidden. The grandpa's accidental death is a taboo.

Really, I...

-- I understand. You don't have anything to suspect me in, father. You don't have anything to scold me for. Because we are a family.

It hurts me to hide this secret within myself and ignore grandpa's death. But I can reveal that to public.

The so-called family meetings were endless secret discussions, with no end in sight.

Moon excited me. It saw just what monsters are we turning into. I know that from history lessons. Tiger or a fox - I think it's a good analogy. People are happy

until they know who they really are.

*

Still, I think that lately the situation has only gone worse.

If you can shut a baby's mouth by giving it a candy, adults have a much harder time controlling themselves.

It appears that father realized that. If I was five years old, I would've been left alone, and I would've forgotten everything. But he reminded me of that case countless times.

Father made it so the memory of my grandfather sunk into my memory.

After being taught in junior school, in middle school I started thinking about morality bound to us.

Obviously, father started suspecting and being aware of his own daughter, who was growing up as a proper person.

I think that brought him quite some headaches.

He himself dragged me into this, himself made a big deal out of it, and made me the odd man out.

Pressure on me now reached the limit, and I was irritated even by smallest things.

That's why I run.

My brother irritates me. I think he should be taught a lesson.

I really think that.

*

Autumn came more and more firmly, and I sank into myself deeper and deeper.

My brother is busy studying for college exams. It's awfully boring both in school and at home, that's why I enjoy my evening walks even more.

Thud

Run

.

Thud

Run

.

Thud

Run

.

Thud

Run

.

As my pulse becomes more frequent, I speed up. Sometimes I stop to look around.

I had a lot of joyful moments in my life, but running is by far the best. Yes... and still - when did the time that I spent running become the happiest in my life?

"Tomori is a great child."

I was always an object for pride.

Going out an our too early because of my impatience was a mistake. I ran forward as usual and, turning around the corner, bumped into her.

The girl was dumbfoundedly watching the shadow, jumping from roof to roof.

"

Father

Someone

is always watching you."

Realizing that, I shivered. I wonder why? I always knew it would happen one day. Whatever.

Anyway, my secret was finally out. It was over in a blink of an eye. I was already dragging the girl's body to hide it in the forest.

She fell from a single hit to her neck with a branch. I wasn't trying to be original in my ideas.

Making a stop, I thought about humaneness of my doing, but since it wasn't the first time, I felt no guilt.

How to say it... I only felt an unpleasant chill when I realized that my secret is revealed.

"Because we are

a family

accomplices

"

Such unexpected events are sort of an entertainment for me. Nothing can give you joy forever. What you were interested in yesterday may not interest you at all tomorrow. Of course, you had fun, but you grew tired of it. Or, if you think about it, it's all not so new...

That way entertainment also has some freshness. Nothing can give you joy forever. If the entertainment source is not changed, then consumer's mood will change. Entertainment sources are grasping their existence and changing consumers so they don't get tired of them.

-- What happened that day...

I enjoy completely different things now.

What was bringing me happiness back then?

What brings me happiness now?

-- *That.*

I can't contain myself. I want to deal with everyone who saw me.

Reason for my running is obvious. Animals run to hunt. They hunt to live. I hunt too.

I don't care who will it be - a man or a woman, an adult or a child. I would prefer a woman or a child, but my target is chosen only by coincidence.

Weak creatures can only feel the pulse of life when in fear. That's why hunters help them feel alive when they hunt.

-- I'm always acting quietly.

Yes, I want someone to notice me.

I want to feel like I'm a victim sooner.

Sometimes I stop and look around. I can be busted once and for all at any moment, but still after three days in this anxiety I want a new witness for myself.

"Tomori... Are you not hiding anything from me?"

Like I'm on his side now.

Brother doesn't know that, but our family are murderers. And the truth is that I, as a part of it, also hide a killer demon within myself.

But father and mothers are not stupid, they noticed that I'm hiding something. I feel their fear.

Because we are accomplices.

If I can't hunt for seven days, then I'll give out all their secrets, but if I'm busted during a hunt, my parents will be imprisoned as well. That's why people that know my secret are a problem. To discuss that problem, we call a family meeting, where I tell them I already dealt with it...

By the way, why are the parents, who know my secret, still alive?

*

Winter came, and it brought a new year with it.

As autumn left, I became a little lonely. Relationships with my father and mother were still stretched, and I started to think that having a brother isn't that bad.

-- Even though late, but let's celebrate this new year together.

I targeted my parents. I was sure that a very entertaining hunt awaits me, but I still had no bait.

I carefully touch the ground, I hide my presence, I already sharpened my fangs. Serial killer in our area is still not found. Best way to hide the trace is to hide a corpse in a corpse, killer in a killer.

All is ready.

I picked a girl from second block of Shikura as a target for next hunt.

Falling snow makes me permanently feel that chill. It's already February.

-- It's even better that way.

The dead of night, pierced by the sound of cracking bones. With particular reason, I proclaimed this night as the beginning of a massacre.

February 14, 2003, midnight.

The killer in second block of Shikura got revealed.

Neighbors heard the screams coming from the house of Ishizue Masamichi, and called cops. Two policemen patrolling the area were sent after the call. They found bodies in Yamanashi residence, which was next to Ishizue residence. It

was the fourth homicidal case like the ones acted out by Hinomori Shusei (28 year old, male). He was wanted by the police for already a long time.

To ensure safety of residents, evacuation order was given for the nearest buildings. After full evacuation was confirmed, at 00:50 AM, police surrounded the house where potential criminal was hiding.

Touma Mato's team for catching possessed came as a reinforcement, after which Ishizue Arika (18 year old, male), who lost his left hand in the incident, was taken into custody.

According to Touma Mato's report, at 00:50 AM the house was stormed and the criminal was successfully caught. No one of the neighbors got hurt during the arrest. That way amount of victims during the apprehension was zero.

Only later, after that case was dealt with, it appeared that one person went missing. Amount of people saved and victims didn't match the number of residents in that area. It was an official message.

That's when this case was assigned to community safety department.

Epilogue - beginning of 2004, winter.

-- What? Casual security? Arika, can you really do it?

Even if not, when Mato-san asks for it, you can't refuse.

Year 2004 - I got discharged from Origa hospital, got acquainted with Karyou Kaie, then a lot of stuff happened, and here - end of the year, winter. I was cornered, chained, and ordered to guard. To be honest, I wasn't very happy.

*

The scenery around a worn-out van was just a silver melancholic world. The snow was falling and covering office quarters with loneliness since the very morning. Three o'clock in afternoon. Not a single silhouette on a footbridge, not a single car on a highway. As if finishing their work day, the identical buildings turned off the lights in their windows.

It really felt like end of the year.

No more ruins are to be seen, since it was already ten years since the humanity was wiped out. A unit from future in special suits already came and are going to show just around the corner, trying to find the reason for mass destruction - that's the kind of thoughts that were caused by the snowy alley.

But...

-- Sempa-a-ai! There is only enough kerosene for an hour! Maybe we should save it and, like, warm ourselves up later?

But there was also this twelve year old monkey, spitting on all of my poetic etudes. Sits in the car, having fun. Fighting the apocalyptic scenes with her own methods, just like me - in the middle of a fight for survival.

A van worn out after ten years. If you look through the windows, curtains - cabin is pretty poor... Without the back seats floor looks absolutely empty, light from the kerosene burner in the middle lazily trembles. You can't even heat up a kettle on it.

It's probably not a deserted world - more like a gathering of homeless people.

-- Uh, it's so cold. Why are we here today and in this group? Hey, Kirisu, weren't you going to go back home?

-- Where should I get money for the trip... Collectors came just yesterday - took away the last coat of mine. Hey, Tsuranui, don't you have a larger jumper? You should give it to me.

-- Jumper? I threw away all the old clothes last year, but I still have the unworn stuff. Though we have different sizes.

-- I don't care, I'm going to sell it. Aren't you wasting a bit too much lately? Your card will be zeroed in no time. Anyway, share some clothes?

-- No, I won't give you anything! It's your own fault, Kirisu-san. You can just build an igloo and die in it now. And what are you doing here, anyway? And just when us with sempai got such a unique chance, phew! Huge slalom, just barely got it with the tip of ski, and goal! Or something like that, you got what I mean. Tell him, Arika-sempai.

-- Uh-uh, yeah-yeah. Kirisu, give me the coffee. And when you finish venting, close the curtains tighter. Lights went out on fourth floor.

-- Wow, really? Damn. Actually fleeing? If we let go, we'll never see the money... And we'll die from the cold before we starve. Here, catch.

-- Thanks. Anyway, why are we here today and in this group? - I return to topic of the day, all beaten up and tattered already.

-- Yeah, that's weird. But I provided the van and the burner, both of you should be bowing to me.

Even the worst snowstorm can't cool Tsuranui's heart - she's sitting there, merrily blowing - *phew, phew!* - on her brain-meltingly sweet milk tea.

You can't find a greater slacker than Tsuranui in whole Hasekura.

-- By the way, who are you guarding there, a possessed?

-- Didn't Arika tell you?

-- No. Sempai woke me up at six in the morning, asked "Remember the van you bought at bargain price, do you still have it?" Even though he mentioned me becoming a dorm idol, he forced me to come here, and now he's silent.

-- How awful. I guess I can even feel for you today! He did the same to me... He said "Tsuranui is not coming, so come here"

-- So you had to come because I wasn't coming? What does that mean?

-- Well, if anything happened to you... wait, you seriously don't get it?

-- Uh-h... Is Arika-sempai always that mean? It's more spacey with less people.

-- Yeah, it's meaningless to show girls like you any affection. And you're complete opposite of Arika. So anyway, what's up now? Our possessed is on the fourth floor of this building?

-- At least so Kaie said. Hmm?.. Damn, our front seat is visible from the window. I'll get back, move a bit.

I moved to salon, and we sat in quite a tight circle - the van wasn't all that spacious.

-- Sempai, what's this about "our" possessed? Did you already tell me about him? I remember one stood out lately.

-- "Did you tell me"... Do you really like sitting and listening that much? He didn't stand out, and he appeared quite a while ago. Marauding once a month. But police just deals with him like with usual robber.

-- Marauding... He's stealing purses?

-- Yeah. Robbing everyone left and right. Just that only half of the victims survive, at best.

-- Isn't that what they call "maniacal murderer"?!

-- Why would I call him that? And he's not quite a maniac anyway. Also, all his victims are men past thirty years of age.

-- What? Ehh, so he doesn't attack females?

Exactly. Possessed that I'm guarding right now kills even witnesses of his crimes, but completely ignores females. Looks like he's trying to be a gentleman that wouldn't touch a lady.

-- Hmm, what a weird possessed! - and right away: - So, as we cleared this up, let's have a lunch?

-- ...

And who was I explaining all that stuff to?..

Tsuranui cheerfully opened food container. What a treasure chest! Royal dinner from the unbelievable dreams, in four separate boxes. Tsuranui began proudly opening one lid after another. Her fingers with plasters on them were the ritual sacrifice to our provision.

And so, we'll start from the box of burnt fried fish, continue that with a box of burnt eggs, then we'll add a box of burnt harumaki, and for the last - a box of burnt rice. Four dishes for absolutely different occasions. Why was it necessary to put them all in one container?

-- Is this our lunch?

-- What else does it look like? By the way, I demand to have the product expenses shared by half. There - Tsuranui handed us her black work of culinary art.

She's going to kill me.

Before the possessed who would come to this van to shut our mouths - no matter how you look at it, even with the engine turned off, a car is suspicious.

Before Kaie, who said that there will be no salary this month, and with a shining smile put me on a hungry diet.

Before Mato-san, who is pretty gloomy lately, and looks for someone to shoot at - this dumbass will kill me for sure.

-- Tsuranui, can I have some too?

-- Sure, dig in, Kirisu-san! Even though you're an uninvited guest, there's enough for everyone, so go right ahead. He-he, just leave us some with sempai, okay?

-- No problems. Wow! Cool! Look, Arika! This fish has a sandwich inside!

Eh, what?..

-- Hi-hi-hi, I had no money for normal food, so I just took what was inside the van (everything was expired, though), and made some hamburgers. How do they call it... Counterintuitive thinking! Or not... anyway, I'm so witty, I'm getting embarrassed! There. So, sempai, let's eat now - Tsuranui brightly smiled.

No, she's out of her mind for sure.

And this salon is probably full of carbon monoxide already.

-- Later. I'm not too hungry now. But yeah, I understand that you can eat it now. There, look how Kirisu is devouring it.

-- Of course. They even cook bamboo in my village, you know. Cut it in small pieces, add soy, and fry it.

-- Oh, bamboo?! I heard that young sprouts are edible, maybe the grown up ones are fine too? Weird traditions you have, Kirisu-san. But why did you mention it, when it's not related to our talk here?

Oh no, Tsuranui-san, it absolutely is...

*

Lazy afternoon talk. Feigning seriousness, Tsuranui asks:

-- What do you think about feminism, sempai? About that guy on the fourth floor. He's only attacking males, so maybe he's kind to women? How do you like it? Ah yes, Kirisu-san can keep silent, he's not into women anyway.

-- Blabbermouth... That's still better than wanting men. And anyway, Tsuranui, feminism is about female equality. If he's only attacking men, then he's not a feminist. That's called "discrimination".

-- Oh, you're right. Hmm, sempai... So in other words, possessed-san you're guarding now is disregarding women?

-- Well... If he's letting them live, then he's not disregarding them, but maybe valuing? Feminism may be the right word, after all. Female equality, that Kirisu mentioned, is an old song - the meaning was changed, and women just got more authority.

-- So much that some started to worship and idolize them?

-- Yeah. He's a feminist in the conventional sense. He's kind to women, that's for sure.

Right. But who knows if he's not attacking women or just *can't* attack women. Objects are worshiped because they are feared.

-- Hmm. An enemy, but with what manners!.. By the way, are you not same, sempai?

-- I don't think so, but I think that being kind is way easier, isn't it? I would value strictness and justice more, though. Still, exaggerating it is also somehow... Otherwise, get ready for public blame.

It's like a duel. If you take all the hits, you can call it respect for the opponent.

-- Ahem. So then, Arika-sempai took his sister quite "somehow"?

-- Wait-wait. What does my sister have to do with it?

-- Well, you do have a younger sister? And you're hiding her from us...

There was some displeasure, even hostility in that phrase. I didn't really hide anyone, but I didn't want my acquaintances to know about her.

I shrugged my shoulder.

-- Oh come on. Can't a man have a sister or two? Right, Kirisu?

-- Can't. I'm the only son. Arika, you've gotten too greedy somehow. If only I had such a beautiful sister, I would see my life in rainbow colors.

It's two on one!

-- Just a minute, how do you know that?

-- Grr, sempai, you didn't object about her being "beautiful"!

-- I just accidentally found out about it. One girl I know, that was classmate of your sister, showed me the photos. Come on, seriously, introduce us? She's absolutely my type!

-- ...

These two seriously don't understand anything.

They can't even imagine what creature *that* is. Two simpletons, sitting like chicks with their mouths open - pi-pi, we want food and explanations!

-- You know what, trust me, you don't want to mess with her. Remember how two years ago something happened on Shikura hill? My sister was one of the culprits.

-- What? - both of them tilt their heads.

You can't find a man in Shikura who wouldn't know about that tragedy.

Massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy by the possessed with Agonistic disorder on terminal stage - mindless, aggressive to everyone and everything, killing left and right. At least thirty houses fell victims. In just an hour ten dead, six heavily wounded, thirteen wounded - the most unprecedented, but wonderful biological catastrophe in history of Shikura.

Why wonderful? Because in just a couple of days all of Origa hospital's inhabitants were saying in one voice that if "terminals" go wild, a two-digit number of victims won't cut it.

-- Shikura hill, two years ago... Ah, it was when your parents were killed?..

-- Yeah. The criminal paid us a visit in the end. Well, not really a "visit" - it's her own home... Or maybe she just decided that party just started and came to rest. Or she came to end unfinished business before leaving. I don't even want to think what *that* has going on in her head, but in the end that breather was a beginning of an even larger bloodshed.

-- So that night you were at home, when that tragedy was happening in neighborhood? Didn't they announce evacuation?..

-- Well... I was just sleeping, - I awkwardly averted my gaze.

-- I get it. So that's what means being a sister - she could kill you at any moment, but she came to say goodbye! She wasn't watching you all these years in vain, Arika-sempai!

Well, it's hard to argue. In the end, I'm so callous, I only woke up from the pain in my left hand, when my parents were already dead.

But that callousness is useful sometimes.

That night... *That* in a dress, in my bed; a completely missing arm; police car lights, clearly visible from the windows of the second floor. And the explosion in the end. Like I've gotten myself into Ultraman's war with alien monsters. My callousness allowed me to completely understand all that hell and not pass out - that's why I'm grateful to it.

-- What kind of girl was your sister? Oh a photo she looks peaceful, like a princess, or a French doll... What did she have in her hands - a knife, a saw?

That's the virtue of Tsuranui - she continues asking questions until the topic of interest isn't completely covered. She doesn't like horror stories, but doesn't mind bloody stories like these, that actually happened. No one can forget how cheerfully she was carving a chicken in high school.

-- Well, I didn't see anything like that. When I lost an arm, she was unarmed.

-- Tore off with her bare hands?!

Like a scene from culmination of a bloody movie, right? But it doesn't matter - even a scene like that would look better than what actually happened there, that's why I remained silent.

-- Yeah-yeah. She didn't like instruments from long ago. But nunchucks or bilboquet she never left alone. Played with them until they broke.

-- Ah, hmm, bilboquet... Your sister really is a rascal... - she said, blushing.

Translated from Tsuranui language that probably means "lewd rascal".

-- Bilboquet is like a small rocket with a ball on a rubber string. When you come back home, ask your dorm landlady. She might have something like that.

-- Okay, I'll ask her when I'm home. Forgive the dummy, okay?

Tsuranui was shyly scratching her cheek - she was that embarrassed for not knowing the entertainment of common folk. Even though she was acting like a child, her behavior was quite dignified.

-- Anyway, she doesn't like weapons. Though I heard she was walking the streets with a lot of hidden shivs or bats.

-- But she's possessed, right? And no one noticed that?

-- Sister was one of those changing on the inside. Most possessed grow new organs and physical strength, and *it* probably had all the changes go into strength.

That's why you can't see it until the end.

It wouldn't be interesting, anyway.

-- Was she a good girl?

-- Able. Made her parents proud! They were turning a blind eye on *it*, I think.

-- How about you? Were you appreciating your sister?

-- In the sense that I wasn't bothering her - yes.

-- She was sharpening her teeth for you though...

-- Yeah. I just can't remember for what.

Tsuranui hit the bullseye. I absolutely can't remember what I could've done for *it* to say: "Brother, I just can't wait to kill you!". So the reason could be not me, after all? Though I don't know for sure anymore... probably. I guess something just went wrong.

-- Shozai, are you here?

I was interrupted at the best moment possible.

Boom, boom - our boss, Touma Mato-san, knocked in the door.

She was, as usual, in a strict costume. From her pockets two twins-"Berettas" were eerily poking out.

The woman didn't come alone - two policemen in uniforms were hanging around nearby.

-- Good day.

-- Good work, I see. So, where?

-- There. Ah, right, don't you want to join us?

-- Thanks, but not now. I'll leave for a bit, make me some coffee.

Mato-san waved her hand, said "bye" and left. With such ease, as if she just said "I'll just go put this paper into shredder".

White snow was like fog - Mato-san walked into it and disappeared into the office building.

Policemen following her stayed at the entrance.

Well, that's right. They would only be a bother for her.

-- Woah, Mato-san is stern as usual. So cool! If I were a girl, I would fall in love...

- Tsuranui Mihaya pat the back of the front seat.

-- ...

No matter how you look at it, Tsuranui is still a girl, biologically.

-- Why are you staring at her? You got what she tried to say by that. Can you

imagine sis Touma as a guy?

-- I can't. If we're going this way, it's easier to imagine us, hm...

-- Exactly. So, Arika, did she ask you about the possessed?

If he hits Mato-san, we'll get all the punishment. Kirisu just probably wants to know if we can run or if it's useless already. Then again, Tsuranui is here today.

-- No, don't worry. Mato-san only knows that we have a possessed here that is really unlucky. She said: be it with one hand, but don't let him flee.

Soon, the deserted town got filled with gunshot sounds.

Then sounded some orderless resistance.

And then came weirdly rhythmical sounds of fight.

Bang, bang, crack, bang.

Of course, I'm used to it already. But guessing the overpowering from the sounds... that's a bit too much already.

-- She's so harsh, eh.

-- Yeah... I already said that he's very unlucky, but generally anyone that catches Mato-san's eye loses all the reserves of luck he had. My sister too, she would've fled if it wasn't for Mato-san.

And again: "What?" - perplexed looks.

Right, if they didn't know about my sister, then they don't know about Mato-san too.

Now the two are in the "What are you talking about?"-mode.

Honestly, ignorance is bliss for them.

Curiosity killed the cat, as English people say. That's how misfortune spreads.

-- What, are you that curious?.. Okay, but don't regret asking later.

Of course, they want to know.

Then again, they asked about *it*, and it wouldn't be complete without a story about Mato-san.

-- This is a long story. Basically, Ishizue Arika wakes up one night - and he's already an invalid...

Outside the car was cold - just like that night.

That night of grinding bone.

Bloody harvest of a beautiful life born.

3/ Formal hunt

February, 2003.

Arrest performed in Ishizue residence was a part of police operation of "rescuing" an A-syndrome carrier with unusual symptoms.

For an assistant police inspector Touma Mato it was the first independent task. Besiegement of the second block of Hasekura hill was over in twenty minutes. Forty policemen were mobilized, half of them were already working on Hinomori Shusei's case and were called for his arrest, the other half were usual patrolmen.

-- We were ordered to mobilize armed men, but I see that not many of you are actually armed here. Well, whatever. Attention everyone: open fire even under the smallest threat. Just don't dare to get used to it - we have a special case today.

Policemen usually didn't have service weapon with them - it was only issued before the arrest, and returned after. You couldn't simply get it when you wanted. Even during emergencies you had to have it holstered - as a symbol of intimidation, not enforcement. But there are always exceptions. Even if there was an order to get armed from above, policemen may refuse to shoot. Intimidating patients with bullets was considered by them as a pretty bad idea. Do that, and you can wave goodbye to your career.

Touma Mato was giving orders.

People behind her were quickly blocking all the ways out of the besieged house.

-- Everybody got it? If the suspect decides to break through, be prepared to open fire. I guess this will look more like a hunt than an arrest.

-- Assistant inspector Mato-san, can we begin now?

-- Yes. Don't let him go at any cost. Any survivors inside?

-- We could only take a look at the yard, but Ishizue Kanata notified us about

just a couple of corpses inside.

-- What about others?

-- Neighbors were evacuated, but two people were missing during the check.

They are probably still inside.

-- Well, we'll see. Room on the second floor, right? Give me the floor plans. So...

Looks like it's quite narrow inside, I'll manage alone. Everybody else, split into groups. Higher ranking ones, protect the newbies, if it's their first arrest mission.

-- Roger. When do we start?

-- In a minute. I'm thinking if I should take my favorite shotgun. It's my private property, so don't get carried away.

Assistant police inspector Touma Mato went back to her car.

Appearing from the trunk, Benelli Super 60 was a real work of art, and even had a self-loading system. Even though it was heavier than usual semi-automatic guns, it wasn't less reliable. Apparently, this was the weapon selected for one-handed shooting.

The woman turned into a real hunter - she tied her long hair, put on her capturing suit, and gently placed two Berettas into holsters on her belt.

-- Let's begin! Don't forget to place ambulances! Don't give detainees to city department! Looks like Origa hospital is getting another great D-patient.

Fixing her grip on the shotgun, she started walking to the house. Cold night was a great addition to the police operation.

From the depths of Ishizue mansion sounded an inhuman scream.

*

From somewhere far away, barking was heard.

Yeah...

Even the looks of a young girl couldn't confuse them. This beautiful dress was sewn especially for today's bloody night.

Annoying sound of police sirens was heard from the outside.

Why did police react so fast?

Why are the casualties so high?

How many corpses are there in total?

Frowning her elegant eyebrows, the girl was gliding down the corridor with light steps.

Well, parents died, that's for sure. Right now they're lying in the guest room - not letting each other go even in the last moment of their life.

Fluttered up the stairs.

Corner room of the second floor is brother's room.

It was becoming restless outside, sirens sounded louder, but right now it didn't matter a single bit. We miscalculated somewhere after all, apparently.

The girl abruptly opened the door, entered, and locked it. She then closed the curtains, to get rid of distractions. The person in the room was sleeping quietly, and a smile came over her face again.

With pleasure and without restraint, we will get what we want.

*

The room on the second floor was locked, and voices could be heard from inside. Without a second thought, Touma Mato destroyed the door with a high-caliber shot.

And froze in confusion.

What is this? In the dark room, there were a guy and a girl. She hugged him around the neck, he looked angry and at the same time sad. Girl laughed in a velvet voice. The suspect,

Akuma Tsuki

Hinomori Shusei

, was nowhere to be seen.

The blame is usually laid on a male.

However, when the policewoman saw the guy's arm, she understood everything.

Touma Mato momentarily turned to the girl in a white dress, unholstered a Beretta and aimed for her left shoulder.

Gunshot.

With a short squeal, the girl jumped from bed in a blink of an eye, making the bullet hit a wall. A moment later, shotgun barrel shot up and a *thunderous gunshot* was heard.

-- Kya!

In a rain of wooden splinters from the ceiling, a snow-white lump landed on the ground. Girl realized that she cannot escape - opponent was pushing forward.

She avoided the shotgun shot only by changing jump trajectory from ceiling to a wall.

-- Just what is this?..

Holding a piece dropped from ceiling in her hand, the girl stood up, and Touma Mato immediately shot her left shoulder.

White dress got stained with dark red.

-- A-a-a-ah...

As blood flowed between girl's fingers, she raised her hand up and started licking small droplets off.

Then she looked at the policewoman, who was holding her aim on her.

-- Who taught you such manners, auntie?

Saying that, she threw the ceiling piece.

Thunderous gunshot.

Debris still hit the woman, after which both realized that it was a big mistake.

White-dressed girl threw a piece, which was destroyed by Touma Mato's shot. A second later, six bullets pierced her.

Gunshot, gunshot, gunshot, gunshot, gunshot, gunshot.

To stop the criminal, Mato fired two more times, dropped shotgun to the ground, grabbed the other gun and kept feeding lead to her target.

Policewoman was just a toy to the girl, the girl was just a possessed to Touma Mato. Nevertheless, both of them considered the other a worthy opponent. Still, both of them realized their physical difference, and neither went easy on the other. Their characters didn't get along well. As for mutual hatred, it couldn't be put to words.

-- A-a-a-ah!!!

Even after getting shot nine times point blank, the girl was still standing - it appears that she was only worried about her white dress, which now looked like pieces of wet, torn cloth.

-- Here! Here! You want some more?

Was she really worried about her garment more, than about her injuries? With an irritated shout, the girl attacked Touma Mato.

A tremendously strong kick.

Gunshots.

A storm of splinters.

Gunshots.

A deadly dance of 9-millimeter beads.

With each miss, the girl's power increased - 50 kilograms, 100 kilograms, she almost broke a wall with an accidental hit. Even a dozen point blank shots couldn't take her down.

For a second, both of them froze.

The girl looked at the torn clothing that remained on her body, and clicked her tongue.

Touma Mato dropped a pair of ammo-less guns to the ground.

A ringing silence.

The criminal suddenly jumped, policewoman simultaneously kicked the shotgun up from the ground.

Thunderous gunshot.

Incredible. The girl, instantly changing her jump trajectory, went to side - the shot, barely grazing her hand, pierced the wall. Touma Mato was worried about the victim, who was lying in bed all this time. The girl realized that she has nothing to do here anymore, and ignoring everything jumped out of the window and onto the roof.

Policewoman was pondering about what to do with weapons.

-- Unthinkable... Even a shotgun doesn't do a thing to her.

A rifle was too dangerous in a closed space like this.

The woman picked up the pistols, reloaded them, hoping that they can be of use after all.

-- Excuse me, I'm with the police, - she said to a lying guy. - I'm performing an arrest of a possessed. Please stay here.

Holding a Beretta in each hand, policewoman got out of the window and jumped to the roof of a neighboring house.

Touma Mato had four clips with sixteen bullets each - a total of sixty four bullets. But no matter how many she had, if that creature doesn't even care about ten point blank shots, she couldn't imagine how to deal with it.

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When the policewoman came to second floor of a neighboring house, she was greeted by the sound of an old CD player.

-- What's that?

The sound suddenly stopped. The woman couldn't believe her eyes - CD player, now looking like a small sandbag, was grabbed by a feminine hand that broke it like it was an everyday thing. She made the technology into a huge, blunt

murder weapon.

-- Shall we continue?

With an incredible speed, she threw the CD player toward the policewoman.

Leaning to a side, Touma Mato shot the flying object down - but it was just the beginning. Player turned into scraps, the girl stretched her hand and said, "That's my weapon."

That fraction of the girl, that has already turned into a beast in human form, had absolutely incredible abilities.

Speed and power of her muscles, stunning resourcefulness.

Crazy amount of energy and lightning fast reflexes.

Amazing resilience and metabolism.

Any object that could possibly harm a human turns into a lethal weapon in such hands.

Everyday environment became hell on earth. Books on the table, pencils, pens, furniture, hundreds of items became Touma Mato's enemies.

Unthinkable whirlwind, incredible power. How could two guns help that? A usual, inconspicuous room became a lethal weapon, the girl became a mixer of death - she relentlessly destroyed everything her hands could reach.

-- Just what the hell is this?!

Policewoman managed to survive in this storm. She was dodging, hitting, shooting, tried to destroy the objects the girl was about to grab. All of it was useless - no matter what weapon Touma Mato could have, the girl was coming out unscathed.

Irritated and confused, possessed girl screeched at the top of her voice. The room had nothing that could be used in a fight anymore - there were no more objects capable of killing a human. Breaking down a wall, she flew into the next room, full of everyday objects. However, the policewoman was prepared, and already took aim for the girl.

Quickly grabbing a suitcase, the possessed started protecting herself from a hail of bullets, mostly covering her head. Apparently, a brain injury would be fatal, as she wouldn't be able to move.

Another ruthless hail of bullets.

The possessed could take that attack, however - that was the reason she had to be killed right now.

But suddenly, both pistols stopped, and possessed lowered the suitcase, after which she immediately leapt toward the policewoman. With a full swing, she threw the suitcase in Touma Mato's head. That hit was way beyond human capability, and, being a normal human, the policewoman could only block the attack as fast as possible with her own hit.

-- What?!

The suitcase made a pitiful cracking sound. The girl immediately leapt to a wall as Touma Mato finished reloading her guns, but the moment was lost.

The suitcase was pretty small for this possessed. She reached out her hand toward bed, but the policewoman destroyed the case with a precise shot.

-- Damn!

The girl broke another wall and slipped outside - she didn't have enough weapons, and she hastily ran into next house. Touma Mato followed her with enviable agility.

The criminal was soaked in blood, the policewoman didn't have a single scratch, despite everything she had to go through. She wasn't getting conceited, however - the girl was the one with the upper hand in battle. Touma Mato was a normal human - if she gets beaten or cut up, she'll die. Unlike the girl, who would live so long as her brain is alive. The possessed also realized that, so she used only the left hand, always covering her head with the right one.

The policewoman continued her pursuit.

-- Touma Mato speaking. Second car, report in. Target is moving along the first block, get ready to open fire. I can't handle this alone. If I don't report in five minutes, you're moving under command of police inspector Tamura.

Putting away her radio, policewoman reloaded her guns. Last clip. As soon as I'm out of ammo, I'll be killed. But before that, the possessed needs to be rendered helpless.

-- Ah... Just what am I going to do with your head?

Policewoman was thinking how she doesn't know any living beings even slightly resembling this criminal. That's why she didn't wish to kill her - she wanted to catch her alive. After all, the girl wasn't immortal, and her body was becoming weaker the more Touma was shooting. It should probably be enough if her limbs are severed. She won't stop breathing while her brain is alive, the woman was absolutely sure of that.

*

-- How?.. Why?! - the girl wiped her tears while walking.

She wasn't crying from pain. She just couldn't understand, why can't she kill this woman - the haunting thought was stuck in her mind like an iron rod.

-- There she is!

An unfamiliar house, an unfamiliar kitchen. The girl immediately grabbed a knife to cut the policewoman up and fiercely attacked, destroying a microwave oven on her way, but Touma Mato dexterously dodged it. Suddenly, the criminal girl felt blinding pain in her fingers. She realized then that they are broken, and knife is in the hands of her pursuer.

-- Wow, you're like a magician!

The girl froze for a second - she was so amazed with this turn of events, she forgot where she was.

Sharp blade sunk into torn flesh in a blink. Dress, already black, became crimson again. *Screech*. Knife broke, meeting the bone, and policewoman threw the useless handle away.

-- Damn you!..

Forks pierced the air. Touma Mato dodged two of them, third one grazed her hand holding a gun. Sound of three gunshots resonated in the kitchen. This was the last drop.

Every item from the surroundings flew toward the policewoman - cutlery, computer, frying pans, oven, couch, even plasma TV... That cursed girl's actions did not follow any kind of logic. Everything she touched got torn to bits and

pieces.

Touma Mato dropped her guns and went into hand-to-hand combat. She was just playing with her. Or she was just afraid to kill her.

With every hit of mine I asked myself a question - why doesn't it work?

My experience betrayed me. My knowledge betrayed me.

If the girl was a superhuman, the policewoman was an expert. Natural gift was shattered by a steel hard willpower. The spirit, polished by time, triumphed in five minutes.

-- A-a-a-ahh!! I lost? Lost? Lost?!

The girl turned to flee. She wasn't looking for the next room filled with weapons, she was actually running away. The fight was nearing its end. If the possessed really wanted to disappear, the policewoman would never be able to catch her. That would be simply impossible. The girl could be saved by her legs alone. All Touma Mato could do right now was chase her. And the girl could leap from building to building.

But, how frustrating. Damn, damn, damn!

She had the upper hand in every fight, she could easily win, but instead she ran away.

The girl jumped down from the roof to a stone road. The landing was a too rough - her body was too full of bullets and she was too tired.

That's why she didn't immediately notice a line of police cars in front of her.

-- Fire!

A hail of lead assaulted the girl, but she managed to jump away. She jumped onto a roof of a neighboring house, leaving police squad empty handed.

But the possessed was on the edge. Wasting too much energy on her pursuer, she wouldn't be able to kill that many policemen. The girl turned back to her house,

there should still be food there. She flew through the night like a ballet dancer - she was always proud of her legs. But right now, these legs were barely holding up her fatigued body.

She couldn't get to a second floor right away, so she just sneaked from the yard into the living room.

-- Hi!

Touma Mato was waiting for her here.

-- Ah...

If she attacked now, she could win. Even on the verge of death, the girl had a chance to win. The policewoman also felt like her opponent was getting ready for a final round. But the broken possessed didn't have any strength anymore.

She couldn't overcome the fear of losing.

Until this moment, the thought that she can lose never even crossed her mind. Just like this woman, she didn't know a failure, that's why right now she had to go all out. But no matter how much she tried, she couldn't gather any strength.

-- I won't lose!

It was arrogance, broken by a defeat.

The girl thought about what could have possibly happened, why couldn't she win.

She had a lot of power, however just as much recklessness and foolishness.

As this thought appeared in her mind, anger started growing from the depths of her conscience.

-- Ah, is that so? Then why don't you use this?

Touma Mato, turning to the girl, threw her a gun.

A moment of silence.

The ammo was long gone, but the girl gave in to temptation and grabbed the weapon - she was only pursued by failures so far.

It was a two-handed weapon. And when she tried to finally overcome the layers of mistakes she has made, to give her life a chance to continue...

-- Finally you used both your hands.

A clang of knife - and blade entered the base of girl's neck.

She started to silently fall on her back, life was gone from her eyes. Just before her death, she showed her true face.

-- Is that so...

If you don't have a goal, why are you born, why are you hoping?

If you don't have a goal, why are you thinking, why are you dreaming?

That was the reason of her defeat, self-defense, putting the lifespan at the forefront.

But that didn't matter anyway. She won't be same as before. At this very moment, she was *allowed to grow*, even if in Touma's favor.

-- A.. ah...

But that is yet to come.

Right now, without realizing that her life was saved, the girl was in a state of a newborn.

Cutting of the umbilical cord.

Brain only barely able to work, the girl's power was lowered by an order of magnitude.

In other words, it was over. The round between Touma Mato and the possessed ended with human's victory.

-- I'm just thinking...

Touma looked down at the defeated girl. Picking up her favorite weapon, she shot the rest of the bullets inside the girl's body, just in case.

-- You don't even know how to use usual objects like this.

The policewoman thought that fighting on same level with those possessed is not so boring after all.



Epilogue - end (2004, winter)

-- And that's how it was.

Shh, whhhh. Heavy silence filled the car salon. Sounds of sipping coffee and milk tea. The true story about that night's survivor Ishizue Shozai. Kirisu and Tsuranui were clearly expecting a heartbreaking tragedy, but after Touma Mato's appearance they, apparently, realized that it wasn't that bad.

During the show, or, rather, the storytelling, everyone present understood to the bones that Mato-san is not to be trifled with.

-- Touma-neesan is really strong, isn't she. Well, that's apparent by her body.

And she's also a doctor, right?

-- Who knows. Even if she's walking around the hospital dressed in white, that doesn't mean she's curing any patients. I like to believe she could at least serve as therapist. Anyway, if people like her were doctors, it would mark the downfall of this country's healthcare.

She likes surgeries too much - she even tried to operate on a flu patient once.

-- You think so? She was complaining earlier about narcosis for surgery being inelegant or something. She wouldn't say that if she weren't a doctor, right?

-- You know, that was a joke for sure.

She didn't like cracking jokes, but I liked to think that Mato-san had some sense of humor. Otherwise she appeared too sadis... spartan.

-- Can I have a question? Was sister reanimated and put to a hospital? - asked Tsuranui.

-- Yeah. Apparently, her head was damaged pretty hard - when she lost conscience, problems only piled up. Sometimes the bleeding wouldn't stop, sometimes only brain, heart and airways functioned at all...

That's what happens when you disregard common sense. Fall, and you'll pay all your debts simultaneously.

-- Hmm... That's somehow not convincing. - said the girl, pondering.

-- Yeah, nonsense. Is there even a word of truth in that?

-- I'm not talking about that. It means that senpai didn't do anything to be hated for! She was caught by Mato-san. Senpai himself has all the rights to be angry at his sister! She killed his mother, father, and has even torn off his hand.

-- ...

Killer of my parents.

Maniacal murderer, killing everyone around regardlessly.

Who is the victim, and who is the criminal - it was all crystal clear now. And everyone understands that there are many reasons to not sympathize with *that*.

-- Nope, this story has a continuation. - said Mato-san, returning to us.

Near the building entrance was the possessed, dragged by two detectives. She was still breathing. Her hands and legs lifelessly hung, like ropes, but she was alive. Mato-san wouldn't hurt even an ant today, even if she looked like an Evil Tomato.

-- Good job, boss. Everything went as expected.

Mato-san opened car door, took a paper cup and started washing off fatigue with an improvised coffee, some 50 yen more expensive than ours. Great view, but we were pretty damn cold with the door open.

-- Continuation?.. Sister's story didn't end with that?

Well, Tsuranui didn't mind the cold. Was her burning love to bloody stories that hot?..

-- It didn't. Shozai's sister has one good reason to hate her brother. Should I tell you?

-- Of course! - Tsuranui enthusiastically waved her small fist.

Mato-san, with deep disgust, sipped her coffee. Then, with a barely noticeable smile, she continued my story.

*

It was the biggest miscalculation in Touma's life.

She averted her eyes from her still breathing foe. Knowing her, one could consider it a form of execution.

But she couldn't kill the one she was going to take captive.

It's only natural to avert one's eyes from an opponent defeated in a fair duel.

And the policewoman's fatigue reached the peak.

Her face showed no emotions, but she was on the edge. Just a bit more, and she would've collapsed.

The woman closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. No one would judge her for such a trifle thing.

Only the despicable opponent, who decided to exploit that weakness, could be judged.

-- You're getting old, auntie...

It was too late to turn around.

Like a doll on strings, a girl with burning glare loomed over Touma...

-- Eh, what?

... having prudently sneaked behind his sister, Ishizue Arika - *bam-m!* - smacked her head with a baseball bat.

*

-- Ehh?! You are the one who finished her off?! - Kirisu suddenly shouted, spitting coffee in my face.

-- Well, it just happened...

If *that* killed Mato-san, I would've been next, haven't you thought of that?

In the end, Mato-san was saved, *that* lost conscience and was sent to a hospital.

And when *she* opened her eyes, her first words were: "...Do anything you want, but bring my stupid brother here". She spoke through her teeth. It's sad that this event degraded me from a "nii-chan" to an alienated "brother".

-- Of course, you can get mad at that. I think senpai showed his worst side to the highest extent here.

-- Eh? What worst side?

-- When you decide on something, you go through till the end. Be it your resolve, or your steely determination.

-- Yup, that's logical - nodded miss Tomato.

A friendly girlish circle, what a sweet sight to see, tee-hee. Well, that happens very rarely.

-- What could I do? It was a life or death situation ...wait, sorry, Kirisu, let me out for a bit.

I got a new message on my phone.

I went outside, into a deserted, ashy town.

It started snowing pretty hard.

Not a single person out on the street - even the sound coming from offices completely subsided. Finally, the scenery looked like real end of the world.

-- ... Okay, I'll come. In about two hours. What bus? Don't joke around, no bus will go through these snowed roads. It's okay, I'll walk. Alright, see you.

I cut the connection. Now I had plans until midnight.

-- Senpa-a-ai? Who ca-a-alled?

Then I returned to the car and collected my things from front seats.

-- Small stuff. Will you handle the car alright? I'll be going to my next job.

-- Job? You're going to Kaie-san now? Come o-on, senpai, do it tomorrow... You were telling how you were going to at least today crawl under a kotatsu, raise your body temperature and slip away from everyone into a deep sleep!

-- Right. That's why I'll go and get my new year present.

-- God! Senpai, you're such a gigolo!

-- ...

I already spent most of the day in an ambush. And in that basement awaits a comfortable sofa, providing a very peaceful sleep. Also it's the last day of the year, and I still didn't get any presents.

-- Bye. Thanks for the help, Tsuranui.

-- Boo, I'm being shamelessly exploited again. I'm mad at you, so here's my last counterattack. What do you think about your sister?

-- ...

Damn, this handicapped network girl can't be underestimated.

-- What, what... You know, Arika. Be it a sister or whatever - she killed your relatives. She's like a stranger to you, right?

Whatever Kirisu says, we're still related by blood, no matter how much she kills. And she can't break that relationship until one of us dies.

And if so - *that* probably wants to kill me to become a stranger...

-- Not really... I'll just say that I pray for her to never leave that hellish hospital.

- I turned my back to them. - Well, see ya.

-- Hey, wait. I also have a question. What's your sister's name? - Kirisu stuck his head out of the car.

Come on already...

I didn't want to say it and avoided it as I could, but in the end I was caught.

Forgetting the maniac thing, Kirisu seems to have taken an interest in *that*. But damn, if he's serious, then that's the more of a reason to not know it...

-- Come on, tell me!

-- Kanata. Ishizue Kanata.

Yeah, just like that. Easy to remember.

Kirisu pondered for a moment, then hit his hand with his fist.

-- Ah, nice, I get it. Your parents are funny! Shozai - "here", Kanata - "there"*.

What a friendly family!

-- Nope. Kanata is from "fire" and "axe" - "fire axe".

An uncomfortable pause.

We looked at each other's serious faces for exactly ten seconds.

-- Well, how do you like it?

-- Basically, you shouldn't call a human that.

Of course.

But if you think about it - it sounds a bit cute. When you get used to it.

/month of hunt, recollections - end

YEAR

- 75 Goods loss.
- 76 Touma's daughter is born.
- 78 Sleeping in the cellar of the forest.
- 84 Ishizue's son is born.
- 86 Karyou Mansion incident. Karyou Mansion is demolished.
- 88 Ishizue's daughter is born.
- 92 Surgery. Arika is 8 years old, Kanata is 4 years old.
- 95 ■■■ appears. Nouzu residential area delusion. Yamada-san's spontaneous combustion incident.
- 01 **January** -Hisaori couple murder. -Hisaori Makina admitted into Origa Memorial Hospital.
- 03 **Feb** -Hisaori Shinya admitted into a psychiatric hospital for a period.
- Feb** -Yamanashi Tomori disappears. -Hinomori Syuusei search for continuous cases of murder. -Were not resolved.
- Early Summer** -Ishizue Arika and Ishizue Kanata enter Origa Memorial Hospital.
- Ishizue Arika's medical examination is completed. Although considered negative, discharge is not allowed. -Hisaori Makina meets the Ishizue siblings.
- Winter** -Christmas at Origa Memorial Hospital
- Daydream (Malion in day dream)

04

- Beginning of the year** -Hisaori Makina is discharged (HandS. R)
- August** -Ishizue Arika is discharged, starts a new life.
- Ishizue Arika meets Karyou Kaie. (My decorative play-HandS. L)
- August** -First demon errand (S.VS.S)
- Hand.S Sequel. -Ishizue Arika finds new principles to live: "To live as easily as possible."
- September** -Second demon errand. -Kizaki husband Holic Work.
- Ishizue Arika moves to a branch of a warehouse facilities in the city, fourth floor, No. 13.
- October** -Third demon errand. Policeman dog.(Anorexia and overeating-J the E).
- New Year's Eve** -Yamanashi Tomori is arrested (Hunting moon reflection -formalhunt).

05

- Residential Area Delusion (H-RED-B)
- Beauty sleeping on the forest (S.peeping Beauty)
- Some anecdote (D.D.D)